



# ISD 318 Community Engagement Summary Report

**2022**

unTapped, LLC.  
Grand Rapids, MN

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## OVERVIEW

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Independent School District 318 serves over 4,000 students and offers additional programs that serve individuals from birth to adult. ISD 318 includes Bigfork School, Cohasset Elementary, East Rapids Elementary, West Rapids Elementary, Robert J. Elkington Middle School, Grand Rapids High School, Area Learning Center, Invest Early, Early Childhood Family Education, Itaskin Education Center, and Community Education.

The current district mission is “Teaching and Learning for Life to Achieve Excellence.” The strategic aims are “Highest Student Achievement, Safe Environment, Effective and Efficient Systems, and Partnerships.” In 2021 the school district embarked on a process of updating the mission, vision and values of the school district; preparing a strategic plan; and creating a brand identity.

ISD 318 commissioned unTapped, LLC to facilitate a community engagement process that would inform the strategic planning process. The community engagement work began in September 2021 and concluded in April 2022. The main objectives of the engagement process were:

- to ensure students, faculty and the broader communities served by the district were intentionally engaged in providing input for the strategic planning process;
- to better understand community expectations about the educational experiences of students;
- to better appreciate the actual experiences of area students, both past and present;
- to learn ways the district could provide the most meaningful educational experiences while improving relationships with families and communities it serves.

A variety of techniques were employed in the community engagement process, including focus groups, ideation sessions, one-on-one interviews and online surveys. Stakeholder groups included ISD 318 faculty and administrators; students in 8th-12th grades; graduates of Grand Rapids and Bigfork schools from the past ten years; Black, Indigenous and People of Color community members; leaders and managers from for-profit, non-profit and public sector organizations; parents of children in the ISD 318 schools; and people living in the school district’s service area without any current connections or involvement with the schools. Participants were promised that their responses would be presented anonymously and aggregated with other feedback.

This document is a compendium of the input from the various stakeholder groups. The feedback has been summarized by stakeholder groups and contextualized by themes that emerged across those groups.

## KEY LEARNINGS

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### Faculty and Administration Focus Groups and Ideation Sessions

#### **There are disparities within ISD 318 for students' opportunities and abilities to achieve.**

- The most apparent social disparities are the achievement gap for Indigenous students and the layers of disparities for children living in poverty.
- Students from families with greater economic resources and social capital enjoy advantages, but it's unlikely most of those advantaged families truly recognize and acknowledge those benefits.
- There is a common assumption that education is competitive, that to ensure one individual student's educational success means another student will have to go with less. In fact, all students do better when all students do better.
- Not all students have access to broadband. There are even broadband access issues for some school buildings; the district's long-term facilities maintenance plan has identified those needs.
- There is widespread understanding that closing the disparity gaps will require greater resources and more effective strategies.

#### **The district leadership understands what is needed to address those disparities.**

- A student-centered approach to education involves creating a dynamic and differentiated learning environment where *all* students thrive. The assumption is that students will be better equipped to solve pressing real-world problems when they learn in the context of the real world, in real time, and based on their lived experiences.
- Three of the top evidence-based practices to ensure student achievement are:
  1. Teachers believe they cause learning.
  2. Students believe in themselves.
  3. Teachers believe students can learn.
- To be proficient and effective, educators need:
  - Adequate time for staff development
  - Substitute teachers so staff can participate in staff development opportunities
  - Organized knowledge-sharing opportunities
  - Appropriate staff-to-student ratio
  - Viable curriculum
- There is a gap between community perception and the reality of the school district's financial position. The district's financial resources do not match the district's financial needs, and the district needs adequate time and resources to inform the public about why an operating levy is important to the district's vitality.

#### **Educators need help in building and enhancing community trust.**

- Community support in the form of valuing and trusting our educators is critical if schools are going to be able to serve students in ways that meet their needs. A "one size fits all" ap-

proach is detrimental to those most in need. Improved community support is directly correlated to improved education for our students.

**Creating a shared understanding of the vision for the school district is essential.**

- In an organization with many employees, communicating issues and concerns up and down layers of management can be challenging. This is more complicated when there are district staff and building leadership transitions.
- All educators and staff within the school district desire clear direction and a unified vision.

**Faculty have identified the key factors necessary for an ideal learning experience.**

- Fostering supportive relationships (collaboration, trust and positive human connections)
- Addressing social and emotional learning (foster empathy, stronger family, community partnerships)
- Creating a safe learning environment (inclusive, positive, calm, fun, welcoming)
- Engaging learners and teachers in new ways (hands-on, multimodal, reflective, interactive)
- Differentiating modes of instruction (accessible to all, student-centered, responsive to individual student needs)
- Providing adequate resources (money, time, materials)
- Providing reality-based learning (cultural competence, valuable, critical thinking, relevant)

**We can include student voices in the learning experience in the following ways:**

- Providing individualized instruction (offer a variety of ways students can respond, one-on-one time with students, small group work)
- Fostering an inclusive learning environment (value diversity, culturally appropriate, create a sense of belonging)
- Cultivating student-led learning (equity, ask students, listen to students)
- Nurturing strong relationships (trust, supportive, connections, open communication)
- Offering differentiated learning experiences (offer choices, adaptive instruction, believe in all students)

**To do their best work with students, faculty need:**

- Settings with a more ideal staff-to-student ratio (ability to provide differentiated learning experiences, smaller class sizes, equipped to meet needs of all students)
- Adequate resources (money, time, materials)
- Administrative support (professional development, realistic clear expectations, consistent communication)
- To ensure that basic student needs are met (students come to school ready to learn, students have food, shelter, and feel safe at home)
- To be valued (understanding, appreciation)
- To be supported by the community (mental health resources, open honest communication, educators are valued and trusted, volunteers)
- To work with involved and engaged parents and caregivers (trust and support educators, education is valued in the home, follow through)

## Community Stakeholder Interviews

**Living through a global pandemic has generated new awareness about the challenges facing families and students in the district.**

- The lasting consequences of experiencing a global pandemic have yet to be seen, but community stakeholders are concerned about the current impacts on communities and our children. These impacts include greater mental health problems; greater fear, anxiety and depression; a sense of isolation; and the sense that we are becoming further divided and polarized as a society.

**We are experiencing the effects of social and political turbulence.**

- Across the board, people are grappling with a sense of being more polarized than ever before due to the recent turbulent social and political climate.
- People are concerned about the increasing frequency of disrespectful questioning of authority and the spread of disinformation.
- We need more attention on dealing with the legacy of systemic racism and racial injustice.

**Our schools should prepare our children to be engaged citizens and productive community members.**

- People identified numerous skills and knowledge critical to ensuring our young people can thrive, from social skills such as empathy and relationship building to personal interaction attributes (conflict resolution and communications). They also provided a wide range of suggestions to help students leave the school system prepared to lead productive, satisfying lives.

**The relationships between our school system and community should be strengthened.**

- The school district was complimented by many people for its communications efforts, especially as the district navigated the COVID pandemic.
- As the district's population ages, reaching people without any personal or family connections to the schools becomes more problematic and more imperative. Many people do not have a personal connection to the school. People will be supportive if they understand the needs of the district and a plan for addressing those needs is presented clearly.
- Developing a cultural learning component in the district's curriculum would be helpful.
- There is belief among some residents that teachers and staff should be more supported by district administrators within the community.
- Most people understand the need to support the schools financially, and because of that they want to be engaged at a level that informs them about key issues without too much extraneous data.
- Without question, our schools are the heart of the communities they serve. They touch more lives on any given day than any other community institution, and they have significant influence on our future.

## Community Survey

ISD 318 disseminated an online survey in February 2022 to gather demographic and attitudinal information from parents of ISD 318 students and the community at large; 832 people responded in a 21-day period.

The community is very supportive of the quality of education delivered by ISD 318. Among those surveyed, 91% feel the quality of education is excellent, very good or good (10%, 41% and 40%, respectively).

At the same time, there are significant perception gaps between the skills and attributes they feel *should be addressed* in ISD 318 versus those that *are being addressed*. Significantly, among 17 attributes people were asked to evaluate, the biggest gaps occurred among the six highest ranked attributes. In other words, community members felt the school district is not delivering the results they feel most emphatically should be addressed.

|   | Should be addressed | Are being addressed | Gap |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|-----|
| How to apply school-learned knowledge to real-life situations | 77%                 | 23%                 | 54% |
| Responsible decision making                                   | 78%                 | 35%                 | 43% |
| Learning from failure   | 62%                 | 26%                 | 36% |
| Critical thinking   | 75%                 | 41%                 | 34% |
| Leadership  | 65%                 | 33%                 | 32% |
| Problem solving   | 83%                 | 53%                 | 29% |

## Community Focus Groups

Focus group discussions revolved around two questions:

- How can the ISD 318 schools (Bigfork, Cohasset and Grand Rapids) improve and refine educational experiences to best prepare students to meaningfully compete and contribute in the future?
- What suggestions do you have for how we might improve the relationships between schools and families and communities?

The Bigfork focus group yielded the following themes.

- The community served by the Bigfork school does not have representation on the school board, and community members feel isolated from the larger district.
- The educational experience provided by the Bigfork school is perceived as an afterthought. Cultivation of meaningful relationships between the district administration and the community is needed.
- The financial and staffing cuts made by the district disproportionately affect the Bigfork school.

The Cohasset focus group discussion generated these themes.

- Teach kids basic skills and offer programs and courses to prepare them for work available in the area.

- Find new ways to connect with the community because people's lived experiences are different today than they were in the past.
- Students need to be disciplined.

The Grand Rapids focus group discussion generated the following themes.

- Trade skills and life skills should be taught and encouraged.
- Some people fear that the school's curriculum is politically one-sided.
- Teachers who care do make a difference, and we should pay our educators more and provide them with needed support.

### **Student Ideation Sessions**

Students were asked about their perceptions of what it meant to be a successful adult, and then what it meant to succeed as a student. They were also asked how they would improve the daily experience of students if they were in charge.

Some, particularly younger, students perceive a successful adult as having a good job, a stable income and life amenities (house and an automobile). Older students described successful adults as people with personal characteristics of honesty, smart, trustworthy and creative.

Success in school for all grade levels meant getting good grades, trying your best, having good friends, working hard and being kind and respectful.

When asked how they might improve the daily experiences of all students, students were quick to suggest serving better lunch food; this response came from all grade levels. Changing the dress code and requiring less homework were also ranked as high priorities.

### **Alumni Interviews**

#### **How would you describe your educational experience?**

The vast majority of respondents from Grand Rapids were very complimentary of their educational experience, describing it as "very exceptional" and "very positive." The Bigfork alumni explained that the most important thing about their educational experiences was attending a small school with small class sizes which resulted in their having good, meaningful relationships with educators and school staff.

#### **What was the most valuable part of your educational experience?**

Among Grand Rapids alumni, two of the most frequently mentioned values were relationships formed with teachers and other staff, and opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. Bigfork alumni also appreciated the meaningful relationships with teachers who supported them educationally and emotionally.



### **In what ways did your educational experience prepare you for the future?**

Grand Rapids alums observed that in their current lives, they apply the rigor they needed during their school years to balance academic work with life outside the classroom. Extracurricular activities were cited by nearly everyone as a key part of the learning experience, along with imparting life skills they use today.

Bigfork alumni mentioned that learning good social skills helped them move successfully into the next phases of their lives. Some reiterated how small class sizes enabled teachers to personally prepare them for the future by working on their individual needs.

### **For ISD 318 to provide students with the most impactful, effective, and meaningful student experience, what would need to change?**

Grand Rapids respondents valued the education they received, and several referenced the importance of reaching students whose home lives make a traditional education more challenging, either for lack of support from parents at home, or because educational achievement is not valued or appreciated. Others suggested that more preparation for life after high school would be helpful, particularly with basic life skills like understanding how to apply for loans and paying taxes. Providing mental health services and individual counseling were also seen as ways to make students' educational experience more impactful. There is also a recognition that not all students learn in the same way, and that having more approaches to learn—including hands-on learning—would be beneficial.

Most of the Bigfork students wouldn't change much about their educational experiences; they valued the small-school setting but at the same time regretted opportunities they missed if they have had attended a larger school. Some of them mentioned the importance of teaching students how to solve real world problems by focusing on real life challenges and doing more for students who are struggling.

## **BIPOC Interviews**

A diverse group of Black, Indigenous and People of Color were interviewed about their perspectives of the district's educational programming and outreach.

### **What expectations do you have for the educational experiences of area students?**

Most respondents expect that our schools should prepare students for succeeding in whatever endeavor or career they choose. Another common theme was encouraging the school district to be more open and proactive in welcoming and hosting conversations about cultural differences.

### **What suggestions do you have for ways in which ISD 318 could better foster and support diversity, equity, and inclusion in students' educational experiences in meaningful ways?**

We heard three key recommendations from participants: 1) celebrate cultural differences; 2) be more welcoming; and 3) provide time for more DEI training and education for ISD 318 teachers and staff. There were also suggestions to encourage staff to adhere to existing standards for diversity and inclusion in the curriculum and to pay attention to student concerns about intolerance among their peers.

**What suggestions do you have for how ISD 318 might improve school-family or school-community relationships?**

The school district was encouraged to continue communicating clearly and consistently as a means of improving relationships with the community and families. School administrators were urged to have zero tolerance for racist behavior or comments, to create safe spaces for students, and to be aware that school building leaders are not uniformly compliant with expectations to provide access to Indian education services.

**From your perspective, how well does ISD 318 prepare students to succeed in the future?**

Many respondents believe the school district prepares students well to succeed in the future. However, an equal percentage believe that while the district does well for students from stable homes where a culture of success has been nurtured, it underserves students at either end of the achievement spectrum. There is a keen sense that we must do much more for families in poverty. We should also ensure students leave high school with far better financial literacy (paying taxes, budgeting and managing money) than most students demonstrate today.

## ISD 318 FACULTY & ADMINISTRATION FOCUS GROUPS & IDEATION SESSIONS

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### Social Context

For the past 24 months, educators—along with the support staff and volunteers who make public education possible—have been navigating new paths to provide meaningful education during a global pandemic. Public schools have been forced to adapt rapidly. As a direct result of the pandemic, existing equity gaps in the world of education became glaringly apparent, and new challenges arose that were equally stark. Within this context, the staff and volunteers of Independent School District 318 (ISD 318) adapted rapidly to address these challenges. They created and implemented distance learning plans in a handful of weeks that normally would have taken years. They increased and altered existing support systems provided to families to create easier access to food and child-care, and they also scrambled to provide the technology and support necessary for students to learn remotely when necessary.

At the same time, the school district recognized the importance of looking towards the future and to continue its efforts to explore and rethink how to create an educational experience that rivals the best possible. *What does providing the best educational experience possible in a rural context look like?* ISD 318 set out to answer this question using a widespread community engagement approach. This report summarizes the themes and insights gleaned from listening to comments and ideas from ISD 318 faculty and staff and is only one chapter of the overall ISD 318 community engagement report.

Widespread community engagement is foundational for designing a rural education system that not only drives better educational outcomes for area students but also fosters critical thinking in students so they can go out into the world equipped to solve real world problems. This same system should also be capable of supporting and empowering families to expand learning spaces beyond the walls of school buildings. Community engagement ensures the system is designed from the ground up by using a community-centered approach to ensure *all* students thrive.

### Engagement Process Overview

Focus groups and ideation sessions were convened among administrators, faculty and other staff from late September to early December throughout the district to gather input from the people who educate our district's children and those who support them in that work. These unique processes are not intended to generate perfect answers, but should be used to discern patterns so decision makers can build upon the ideas during the strategic planning process.

Four focus groups were convened for administrators and district staff (ISD 318 directors, ISD 318 Strategic Planning Group, Area Learning Center, and Itaskin Learning Center). Discussion questions included the following:

- How do students compare in terms of academic achievement and across socio-economic, race, class and gender spectrums?
- What beliefs are in play that allow for some students to fare well while others struggle to maintain learning momentum?
- What needs to be in place to have them all do well?

- Whose voices are typically unheard? Why? What is being done to bridge racial, class and cultural differences?

Teachers and adjunct staff were asked three questions during six building-specific ideation sessions lasting 45-50 minutes. Ideation sessions are fast-paced brainstorming activities designed to generate as many ideas as possible.

1. What makes up an ideal learning experience?
2. How might we include students' voices, prioritizing those typically not heard, in every aspect of the learning experience?
3. What do you need from the school system and community to do your best work with students?

| Focus Groups                  | Participants | Date   |
|-------------------------------|--------------|--------|
| ISD 318 Directors             | 11           | 21-Sep |
| ISD Strategic Planning Group  | 13           | 27-Sep |
| ISD 318 Area Learning Center  | 6            | 29-Sep |
| Itaskin Education Center      | 8            | 13-Oct |
| Ideation Sessions             | Participants | Date   |
| R. J. Elkington Middle School | 50           | 6-Oct  |
| Bigfork Public School         | 23           | 27-Oct |
| East Rapids Elementary        | 38           | 3-Nov  |
| Cohasset Elementary           | 18           | 10-Nov |
| West Rapids Elementary        | 39           | 1-Dec  |
| Grand Rapids High School      | 61           | 8-Dec  |
|                               | <b>267</b>   |        |

## Themes And Insights

### Disparities Within ISD 318

In the initial phase of the faculty engagement process, we explored the disparities that exist within the district, what is currently being done to address them, and what else needs to be done to ensure *all* students in the district receive the best education. The staff identified both social disparities and infrastructure disparities.

#### Social Disparities

The most common social disparities identified through the faculty focus groups and ideation sessions were ethnic, racial and socioeconomic disparities. Among the most common mentioned were the achievement gap for Indigenous students and the layers of disparities for children living in poverty. This is reflected in the following statements:

*“The achievement gap for our Indigenous kids is much higher than the state average.”*

*“We have approximately 4,000 students in the district and 50% live in poverty.”*

*“I just came out of a session where data was shown that as a state, we are failing Indigenous kids. It is a fact. I don’t want to be part of a school system that ignores facts; as a system I want to be bold enough and have enough integrity to confront the brutal facts, because the bigger*

*we are the easier it is to hide in the shadows. I want us to be a group of leaders that peels back the layers and looks at it. When you peel back and look at Indigenous kids, Black and Brown kids, it doesn't look good. This is our opportunity to be bold and take on the hard conversations. We can be incredibly proud and honest at the same time."*

*"15% of our students are people of color; 40% participate in the free and reduced lunch program, and 20% participate in special education programs."*

*"How do students compare? We have been identified by the State for the past three years as being significantly disproportionate in how many students who qualify with an emotional behavioral disability are American Indian. We are over three times more likely to identify Indian students with an emotional behavior issue over other races. We have been working on it. We reduced the number of kids overall, but we did not get specifically lower rates in our American Indian students."*

Multiple participants noted the social advantages enjoyed by students from families with greater economic resources, connections and influence, and they questioned whether those advantaged families truly recognize and acknowledge those benefits. This sentiment is reflected in the following comments.

*"Does the community know how many students receive free and reduced lunch? The 'haves' don't know, but the 'have-nots' know because that is their life."*

*"People who have resources can get what they need to help their kids, but people who are struggling often can't advocate for the resources they need."*

*"One half of our population wants to see turf, sport signs, and more course offerings, while for the other half we need to allocate mental health and recovery services just to get them up to where they need to be. It is a difficult balance."*

The first step in closing the gap caused by social disparities will require naming and acknowledging the gaps. As challenging as that may prove, the next step may be even more daunting: changing the underlying belief that getting a quality education is a zero-sum game. There is a common assumption that education is competitive, that to ensure one individual student's educational success means another student will have to go with less. In fact, all students do better when all students do better. The following statements by faculty members articulate this very notion.

*"When we are talking about unique learners and getting them what they need, people believe it will take away from the other kids. I think the kids can get what they need and everyone else can, too. Some kids need more. We need to help our learning community see that a diverse learning community can add value to all learning environments. I'm not sure we all believe that. This might be part of perpetuating the learning gap."*

*"I think we struggle with the word 'all.' We want to make sure they are all being served appropriately. Our resources do not match our needs: we have a lack of resources. When I see the resources match our needs, we will see a lot of our issues go away. We have one counselor/support for 600 kids."*

*"We bring assumptions to the table, like the assumption that all students are brought up with the same skill set that we were brought up with, or they have the same values. They don't. We need to find ways to bridge that gap. As an educator, this starts with being aware that there is a gap."*

*“Data is showing our kids are behind academically because of lost learning time. After school opportunities are a way to help close that gap, but it is an access issue in terms of transportation if parents don't have a way to pick students up or if they are working, etc.”*

### **Infrastructure and Facility Disparities**

Faculty noted that not all students have access to broadband. There are a variety of other differences between the various school buildings, and the long-term facilities maintenance plan has spelled out the various needs for all buildings throughout the district.

*“We have new elementary school buildings in Grand Rapids and Cohasset, but the high school and Bigfork buildings are not completely ADA-compliant. Our long-term facilities maintenance (LTFM) plan is never fully addressed, and as projects get deferred, the list gets longer.”*

*“There is geographic inequity for access to broadband/internet. For students in areas where they can access the internet at home (Paul Bunyan, Mediacom, etc.), there's no problem, but we have students who don't have that access.”*

*“Internet bandwidth—especially if they are learning from home—is a concern. Some areas are connected by fiber and have excellent bandwidth, and some don't. Some areas in our district don't even have cell service, so we have had to work to get everyone the best bandwidth. We have to stay flexible.”*

*“There is a lack of people across the district to work in transportation.”*

### **Addressing Disparities in ISD 318: Current Approach**

There is widespread understanding that closing the disparity gaps will require greater resources and effective strategies. We explored with faculty and administrators the ways in which the district is currently working to address disparities. It was clear across all focus groups that while there may not be enough staff or resources to meet all the needs of all the students at this time, that goal remains front and center in people's minds, and most administrators are striving to achieve that objective.

*“It's important to be kind and appreciate people's differences. It's easy to get caught up in negativity. The majority of the community is positive about the schools, but we hear from the squeaky wheels.”*

*“We never turn away students from participating in extracurricular activities due to inability to pay.”*

*“The school system here is not just about the kids. We have a significant employment impact in the community, we provide services to adults, and we offer alternative education options for people.”*

*“We have to make sure we have a viable curriculum, and that our staff is appropriately trained. Last year we saw a lot of growth in educational achievement. We were intentional about our approach. What I see being a game changer for our kids, no matter who they are, is creating more development opportunities for our staff. We have the tools, we know what to do, but we need time and quality professional development.”*

*“We all want what's best for kids, families and the community.”*

*“I've never heard ‘I can't do it’ from our staff.”*

*“The general public doesn’t understand how much cooperation and collaboration takes place to make the district run smoothly.”*

*“The achievement gap for our Indigenous students is much higher than the state average, but why do we have a gap? This is what keeps me up at night. Many of our indigenous students and students of color are living in poverty.”*

## **Addressing Disparities in 318: Future Approaches**

### **Designing a Student-Centered Approach to Education**

A student-centered approach to education involves creating a dynamic and differentiated learning environment where *all* students thrive. This involves building knowledge rooted in today’s reality, so that learning becomes relevant. The assumption is that students will be better equipped to solve pressing real-world problems when they learn in the context of the real world, in real time, and based on their lived experiences.

*“Three of the top evidence-based practices to ensure student achievement:*

- 1. Teachers believe they cause learning.*
- 2. Students believe in themselves.*
- 3. Teachers believe students can learn.”*

*“Our district has taken strides in having a student-centered focus in the last few years. Teachers need to have tools in their toolboxes to use when they see a student struggling.”*

*“The past five years, classroom teachers have tended to push struggling students on to an interventionist (‘I don’t know what to do with these kids’) as opposed to the teacher being the first intervention.”*

*“We need to be teaching all kids at all levels, regardless of demographics, so they receive basic instruction from their teachers.”*

*“We need to help our community see that a diverse learning community can add value to all learning environments. I’m not sure we all believe that. This might be part of perpetuating the learning gap.”*

*“The passively unengaged group correlates with our students in poverty or students who have other demands on them outside of school; we are missing that voice.”*

*“Reinforcement from parents at home helps create the right learning environment at school.”*

*“We need to be meeting kids where they are, and not worrying so much about where they should be.”*

*“Having staff available to listen and available for students in need.”*

### **Provide Greater Resources for Teaching and Innovating**

To be proficient and effective, educators need:

- Adequate time for staff development;
- Substitute teachers available so staff can participate in training and staff development opportunities;
- Organized knowledge sharing opportunities;
- Appropriate staff-to-student ratio;

- Viable curriculum.

*“Let’s make sure we have a viable curriculum, and our staff is appropriately trained. What I see as a game changer for our kids, no matter who they are, is the development of our staff. We have the tools, we know what to do, but we need time and quality professional development.”*

*“We have one hour per quarter for our teachers’ staff development; other schools were appalled to hear this. We have almost zero time to meet with our staff. We can’t continue to grow without that time. This is, however, contractual: our teachers contract says we have one hour for every planning day for conferences that teachers have off.”*

*“One of our true crises is finding substitute teachers. We can’t do professional development because we can’t have two teachers out at the same time because we don’t have the subs. And we need time built into our calendar to do career development. If it was built into our calendar and showed we value it, that would help a lot.”*

*“We need clear expectations based on standards and statutes, not community frustration.”*

*“A community that speaks positively about education would help us do our best work with students.”*

*“Families supporting their child’s emotional and social needs at home.”*

*“Flexibility to work with students one-on-one or in small groups.”*

*“Instill a value for education and learning in the community.”*

*“We need mental health support so all social-emotional needs are met, and students can learn.”*

*“Parents and caregivers supporting their child’s school experience.”*

*“Understanding the complexity of teaching and learning.”*

*“We need support to find solutions to engage parents and guardians who had negative experiences in school.”*

### **Provide Adequate Finances**

Support from the community is manifested in many ways. One of the most obvious ways is the financial support for the school district in the form of property taxes on commercial and residential properties, a key funding source for all educational activities. The State of Minnesota provides property tax aids and credits to reduce the actual amounts of tax paid by property owners.

The engagement process revealed a gap between community perception and the reality of the school district’s financial position. Numerous people discussed the fact that the district’s available financial resources do not match the district’s financial needs. Many people mentioned the lack of an operating levy. It became clear from the conversations that the district will need to take adequate time to inform the public about why an operating levy is important to a school district’s vitality. Most people might not be aware that these levies help close the gap between state and federal funding and provide the resources to help pay for operating expenses such as transportation, utilities, and classroom supplies, issues identified as much-needed in terms of community support from the faculty.

The problematic nature of ISD 318’s financial bottom line can be seen in the following comments:

*“There is never enough funding to go around.”*



*“We are only one of five districts in the state that does not have an operating levy.”*

*“The community should know there is an overwhelming need for more money.”*

*“The district has been deficit spending for 6+ years.”*

*“Please provide equitable allocation of resources throughout the district (remember Bigfork).”*

### **Trust and Value Educators**

Community support in the form of valuing and trusting our educators is intangible but no less important for the school staff. This support is critical if schools are going to be able to serve students in ways that meet their needs. A “one size fits all” approach is detrimental to those most in need. Improved community support is directly correlated to improved education for our students.

*“I think most people have no idea what we have to spend money on. Last year we had to spend \$500,000 just to keep the middle school swimming pool in use; it gets used by the whole community a lot.”*

*“Students should come to school prepared to learn, which assumes their basic needs are met: that they have adequate safety, shelter, and food. Unfortunately, that’s not the case for every student.”*

*“Community support puts us in a hard position because if the community is not supporting us, then how can we go to them without money? We are one of a few districts in the state without an operating levy. We do a lot, we want to do more, but we can’t without the funding.”*

*“We need the community to help with funding, and it would be helpful if the community understood why.”*

*“Remember that we have feelings and families outside of school.”*

*“We need connections to outside resources to support families in need.”*

### **Designing for Equity**

Faculty and staff recognize there are equity imbalances in the ways education is delivered in the school district. The challenge is to measure those imbalances so changes can be made. Who is better off, and in what ways? How do we know? What is working for our schools and students, and why? Once that data is known, the school district can choose to develop equity goals for the district to address the issue. One set of voices typically overlooked in the process is the voices from students themselves.

*“We need to make sure our community values the input from the kids. We need to educate our community on why it is so important to listen to them.”*

*“Having a caring adult in a student’s life is one of the biggest factors for success, and some of our kids don’t have that.”*

*“Allow for different formats to answer questions or discussion.”*

*“Create more awareness of how we use language in class.”*

*“Be flexible and open to doing things differently.”*

*“Build a learning environment where all voices are respected.”*

*“Create activities that encourage the thoughts of all students.”*

*“Establish a trusting environment.”*

*“Give students choices about how to show their knowledge.”*

*“Have conversations about mental health, bullying, substance use.”*

*“Include examples from all cultures and experiences.”*

*“Provide opportunities for students to share personal matters with teachers privately.”*

*“Students who are loved at home come to school ready to learn. Students who aren’t loved at home come to school to be loved.”*

*“We need to give students words and ways to communicate their voices (needs, ideas, expectations and frustrations).”*

*“The voices that aren’t being heard are the students. We hear adults speaking out about personal concerns, or concerns and discomforts voiced by small groups of louder voices. I’m really frustrated. I have heard a lot from adults that I believe kids should weigh in on.”*

*“The kids make me hopeful. We need to elevate their voices, and not allow kids to be used as tools for adult messages.”*

### **Adapting to Change & Creating Shared Understanding**

In an organization with many employees, communicating issues and concerns up and down layers of management can be challenging. This can be compounded by frequent leadership changes: superintendents with different leadership styles and varying ideas about how the district should operate. Some of the comments from faculty members illustrate that point.

*“We need appreciation from administration, not just lip service.”*

*“There are times we need them to stand up for what is right even though it is tough.”*

*“We want to be treated like we are valued.”*

*“It would help to have leaders who actually know what is going on in the classroom.”*

*“Why not listen to the experts who are with the students all day?”*

*“Personal development opportunities that are teacher driven.”*

*“We need staff meetings so I don’t feel so alone all day (and year).”*

*“Say what you mean and mean what you say.”*

The need for clear direction and vision was another recurring theme that emerged from the facility engagement process. This sentiment is captured in the following statements:

*“In five years, there have been four superintendents. It would be nice to have stable leadership at the top. We need a consistent vision forward, instead of changing every year or two.”*

*“We need vision and direction and knowing where we are moving in a consistent way.”*

*“Creating shared understanding of both the autonomy of each program/building as well as the importance of supporting systemwide interdependence through consistent communications will be critical to on-going success.”*

*“Bridging the communications between buildings would be important. The students here at the Area Learning Center are the responsibility of all of us in the district. Sometimes there is some parochial thinking.”*

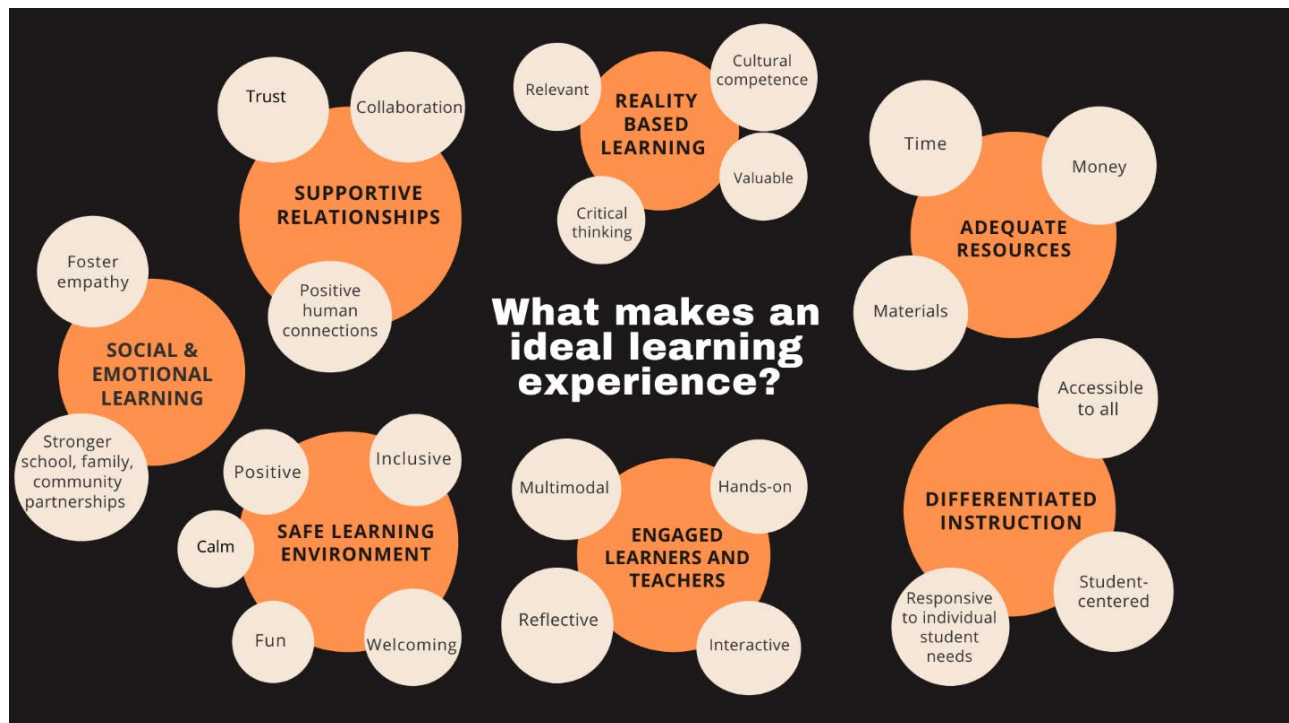
*“A lot of the training the district offers has nothing to do with us here at the Itaskin Center; it doesn’t pertain to us. No one really understands what we do. We are going to need a variety of curriculum and support because we have students all over the learning map. ”*

### Summaries From Ideation Sessions

Six human-centered design ideation sessions were convened at six buildings throughout the district: Rapids East Elementary, Rapids West Elementary, Cohasset Elementary, R. J. Elkington Middle School, Bigfork Public School, and Grand Rapids Senior High School. To create meaning from this data, all of the individual responses were compiled for each question. We examined which ideas emerged most frequently, and then created brainstorming maps, visual representations that highlighted patterns that emerged.

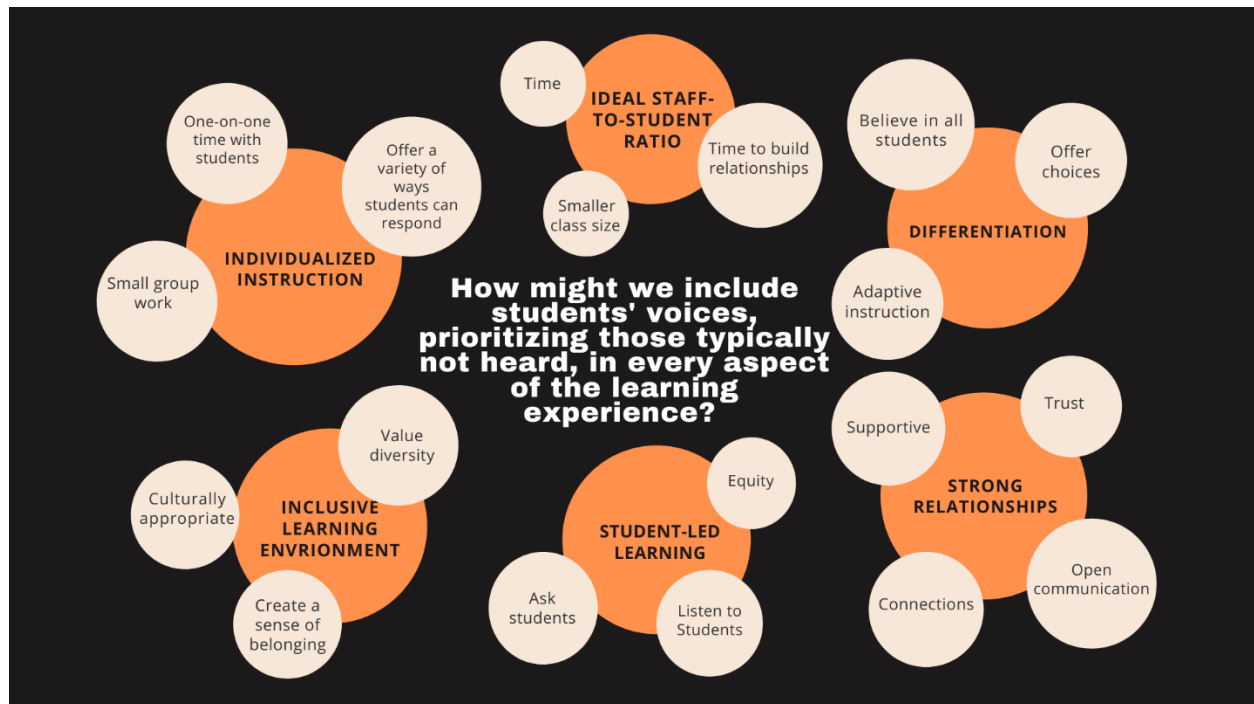
#### Question #1: What makes up an ideal learning experience?

The themes identified were the most mentioned out of 904 responses.



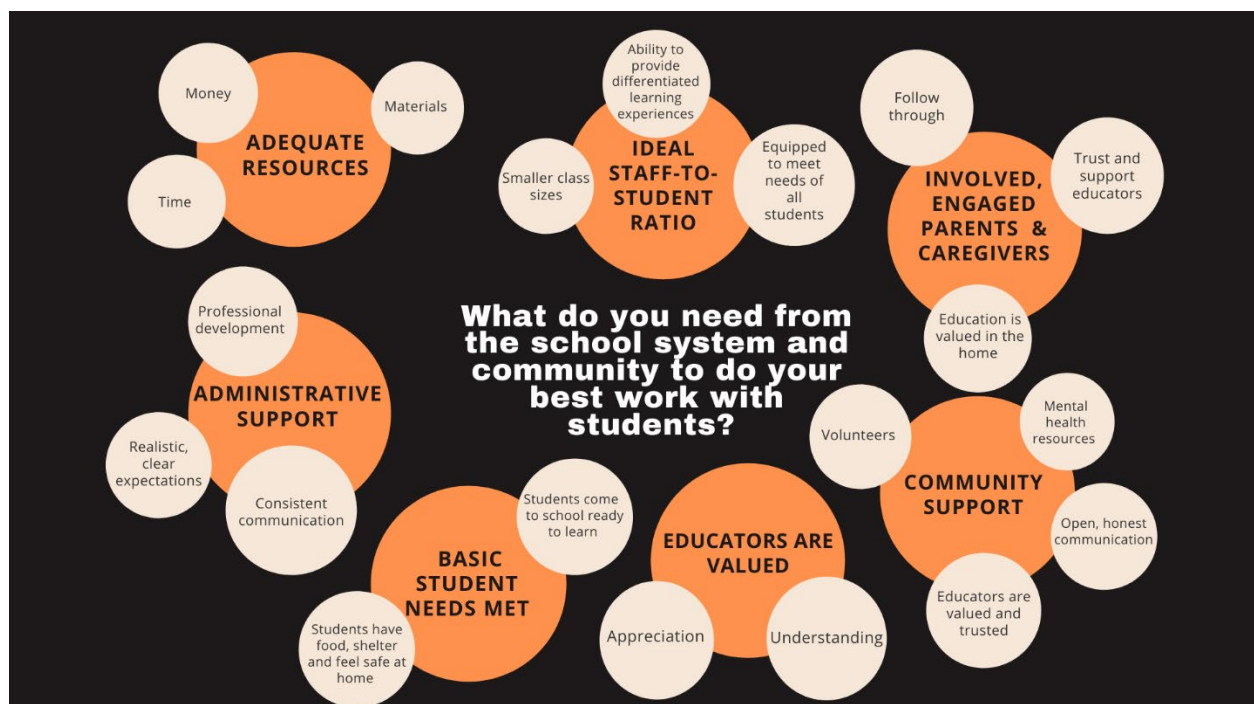
**Question #2: How might we include student voices, prioritizing those typically not heard, in every aspect of the learning experience?**

We identified themes from the 649 responses to this question.



**Question #3: What do you need from the school system to do your best work with students?**

The themes identified here were the most commonly mentioned of the 943 responses we gathered.



## COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

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### Overview

This report summarizes the insights about ISD 318 from 25 community stakeholders. Stakeholders' identities will remain anonymous, but the consultants' recommendations of stakeholders were approved by district leadership. Each phone interview consisted of the following questions; interview times ranged from 30-60 minutes.

1. *How are changes in the country and in the state of Minnesota impacting our community and the needs of our children?*
2. *How are these changes affecting local workforce needs?*
3. *Based on these changes, what life skills and knowledge will be necessary for students to be prepared to enter the workforce and become engaged citizens and community members?*
4. *Based on these potential changes, how can the ISD 318 schools improve and refine educational experiences to best prepare students?*
5. *Do you have any suggestions for how the school district could improve relationships with families and the community at large?*

The questions were asked in a consistent, open, non-prompting manner to avoid leading participants to—or away from—a particular perspective. For example, the first question was asked in a way to enable them to name whatever changes and impacts they felt compelled to talk about without prompting.

For the purpose of this summary, we have teased out the most commonly referenced changes and their impacts and then connected them to ways people believe our educational system could better prepare students to thrive in an ever-changing world. Not surprisingly, the two most common changes mentioned across all interviews were experiencing a global pandemic while at the same time living in a turbulent social and political climate. While not universal, but mentioned consistently through the conversations, were concerns about technology and climate change.

### Impacts of National and Community Changes on Our Community, Our Children and Our Workforce

The responses to the first two questions about how changes to our nation and state have impacted our children, and how those changes have carried through to local workforce needs, followed a few key themes:

1. The impacts of a global pandemic
2. The impacts of national political and social turbulence
3. The impacts of technology and climate change

The comments from the second theme—the impacts of national political and social turbulence—were grouped in sub-themes:

- Disrespectful questioning of authority
- Spread of disinformation
- Dealing with systemic racial inequity and injustice

## **Living Through a Global Pandemic**

The lasting consequences of experiencing a global pandemic have yet to be seen, but participants talked about the current impacts on communities and our children. These impacts include greater mental health problems; greater fear, anxiety and depression; a sense of isolation; and the sense that we are becoming further divided and polarized as a society. This unfortunate sentiment is reflected in the following comments:

*“The pandemic continues to have an impact on children. At first it brought a sense of fear and anxiety to our country. Then it brought division, increased costs of food and shelter, limited access to our public healthcare systems, and it put additional restraints on our education systems. It further amplified existing social issues facing our youth today; issues that were not properly addressed prior to the pandemic: depression/mental health, peer pressure, obesity, maturity at a young age, social media/overuse of technology.”*

*“Families are dealing with much more stress than they had been, and the families we work with are typically living with stress already. We see more mental illness, both in children and adults, among the people we help. There are more needs for support, more needs for caring for individuals. It is so tough in our virtual reality to respond to people with depression, and what’s really missing now is human contact. The lack of contact manifests itself in many ways: isolation, depression, mental illness. Families whose child care is interrupted because the caregivers have to deal with COVID themselves feel that, so their work routine may be interrupted if they have to stay home to care for their children. This is a huge stress all the way around.”*

*“COVID fatigue is real in our communities.”*

*“Because of COVID, kids are more isolated and are absorbing the entrenched views of their parents.”*

*“COVID highlights the importance of the school board and for them to listen to exactly what is being taught and not to be critical of scientific methods and to not carry out what is safe. Our son’s teacher doesn’t wear a mask even though it is the rule right now. How do you expect kids to respect authority when the adults don’t do what they are supposed to? There is going to be anarchy here. This all plays into the distrust and how to be a good community member and take care of each other. How can you show that and prioritize that in all aspects of pandemic and climate change? I was at the middle school yesterday and the kids were just yelling at each other: ‘put on your mask; I feel unsafe.’ It is clearly sarcasm; where do they get this? It is clearly putting aside the community.”*

*“In all aspects of kids’ education, I think they are impacted. I know the budget of education is suffering and stressed. Parents are divided on vaccination. Some say get a shot and then others look down on you if you don’t get it. I think the distant or virtual learning is most impactful on your younger students; our younger kids need face-to-face learning for their development.”*

*“Lots of parents are now talking about their kids having anxiety, we (the adults) have done this to our kids as a society.”*

*“Remote working means we aren’t as connected to our coworkers.”*

## **Experiencing Turbulent Social and Political Climates**

Across the board people are grappling with a sense of being more polarized and divided than ever before due to the recent turbulent social and political climate. The foundation of a solid democracy

is the ability of people anywhere on the political spectrum to advocate for their views aggressively and publicly but to do so without dehumanizing those with different points of view. If this dynamic dramatically changes, the deterioration of democracy comes into question. The impact of this can be seen in the following participants' comments:

*"The last four years of political discourse in America have enabled disrespect, outrage, obstinance, and entitlement from the top down. I believe this has deteriorated the character of many people, including children who learn from the behavior of significant adults in their lives. This has left the morale in classrooms totally bent out of shape."*

*"No one listens to anyone anymore."*

*"We seem to be no longer able to dialogue and disagree without being disagreeable."*

*"Are we raising our kids with the right skills to get along with each other?"*

*"I see that the political polarization that is happening in the country will also affect schools, school boards and teachers. I think our teachers will really need strong administrative support to be able to continue to teach basic history, literature, etc."*

*"I think there is a lot of division, and no one is listening to anyone anymore. I think kids are not going to learn how to coexist and focus on the things that unite us, especially the kids who already have a limited toolbox and are working with less."*

#### **Disrespectful questioning of authority**

*"I believe this has deteriorated the character of many people, including children who learn from the behavior of significant adults in their lives. This has left the morale in classrooms totally bent out of shape. Educators are not the experts any more. I'm part of a national collective, the Christa McAuliffe Institute, and educators from California, New Zealand, Mexico, the District of Columbia and Texas have all observed the diminishment of the role of educator."*

*"Kids are being disrespectful to authority figures in their lives and educators struggling to do their jobs."*

*"The political shit storm has empowered children to be incredibly disrespectful. Parents are leading disrespectful protests and some of it is the stuff they see on TV, Jan 6th people, school shooters and it's like they are heroes. I know this from talking to educators, educators who are afraid and not having fun and struggling without having any level of control over their classroom. Kids saying teachers are violating their rights: this is not going to be good for education and society as a whole."*

#### **The spread of disinformation**

*"I think there is such a huge disconnect between truth and education and doing what is right and best for people. It's been replaced with doing things because of political affiliation. There seems to be a lack of grown-ups in the room, and this is impacting our kids."*

*"Disinformation is at the top of students' minds and where to go for accurate information. Most of the kids understand how algorithms work and are interested in changing this, like how Facebook was under scrutiny. They want to change how misinformation floats to the surface. Unfortunately, I see that anti-intellectualism has been emboldening: more parents want to be on school boards to prevent certain topics from being taught, to prevent masking, and to prioritize Christian values in education. Given the history with Christian values in white supremacy, you could see them trying to push out scientific methods."*

*“We have debates about what is fact and what is fiction, what is real and what is fake, anti-science, anti-intellectualism.”*

*“I do interviews for admissions for MIT so I get to hear the hopes and dreams of seniors in high school, and I would say 95% are concerned about climate change and disinformation.”*

### **Reckoning the historical reality of systemic racism & racial injustice**

*“We need to teach history. There are many things that have transpired in the history of our region and state and country that impact our community today. We have to face up to the past to deal with threats we’re facing today. We’re in sort of desperate times, and I hope that our education system can help us get out of this. White America is not realizing all of the trauma and impact we’ve caused Native Americans and other people of color. We cannot overlook that.”*

*“When you consider the social turmoil in our state and country around issues of diversity and race—and we’re working through those same issues in health care—it challenges us to talk about these issues in meaningful ways. I do think it’s important to recognize that what works in terms of community engagement and discourse in metropolitan areas doesn’t always work in rural communities like ours, in communities that are 95% white. It’s hard for us as leaders in our industry to educate our staff about inclusion and equity, and it’s equally important to have these discussions in our schools, too. How do you include this kind of training in our curriculum? I don’t see these issues going away anytime soon, and we have to begin talking about these issues at the youngest age levels.”*

*“More people have had to really look at racism and sexism and figure out how to change. Hopefully our kids will be more accepting.”*

*“There is lots of resistance locally to diversity, equity, and inclusion.”*

*“We have taken things so far to the extreme, there have been a lot of things that have transpired in this country. DEI has its place and I think there should be more focus on equity. I don’t think including a token person of color is the answer. An organization should bring someone on based on what they have to offer and not base it on the color of their skin or sexual identity.”*

*“We asked our kid: ‘What did your class do for Indigenous People’s Day?’ and he said ‘nothing.’ I told his teacher under no circumstances do we celebrate Columbus Day. We asked about MLK and he said they read a little bit about it but nothing deeper. Nothing about how the USA is built on the backs of BIPOC people. If young kids are able to experience racism, they can learn about it. Our son is in Indian education and gets exposed to some stuff but not super deep; nothing about how the USA is built on the backs of BIPOC people.”*

### **Technology and Climate Change**

Comments about the impact of technology ranged from concerns about allowing high school students to use their cellphones during the day to all kids being provided an iPad while having no idea how to use Microsoft Office, to some people living in areas without access to high-speed internet.

*“We are still focusing on test scores over real world skills. We boast that our kids are using technology and get them all tablets; that’s great, they are users of technology, but they don’t understand technology. Business does not put everything into the cloud, you still have to learn how to download things to a document, to put it on a USB drive. They don’t understand Microsoft Word, have never seen Excel. The real-world system runs on Microsoft Office suite, and*



*we are missing that. I get it that STEM is where it is at, but not everyone is STEM worthy. We need to think about that for our kids.”*

*“From our country or small community perspective, outside of the pandemic which has the biggest impact, it comes down to the fact that technology has changed so fast, and it is impacting our youth. For example, cellphones are catastrophic.”*

Comments about the impact of climate change were more geared towards how we are preparing students to deal with the enormity of this problem.

*“I think more and more as climate change is showing itself, we need to address how education addresses climate change.”*

*“I think climate change is depressing for them. They have been dealt a bad hand and they are going to have to deal with it and it is heavy; it seems a bit hopeless and like doomsday. I think it is going to start costing our society and institutions a lot and that money needs to come from somewhere.”*

### **Preparing Our Children to Be Engaged Citizens and Productive Community Members**

When asked to think about the skills and knowledge critical to ensuring our young people can thrive, participants identified the following list:

- Empathy
- Overall team mentality, including listening to one another
- Conflict resolution
- Interpersonal communications skills
- Relationship building
- Diversity, equity and inclusion
- How to be global citizens
- Civics and democracy
- Volunteerism
- Ability to evaluate information (truth and facts)
- Media and data literacy
- Cultural literacy (appreciation for and acceptance of other cultures)
- Mental health awareness and coping skills
- Social-emotional skills to handle themselves in the many situations they’ll encounter in life
- Critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- Math and writing
- Technical skills (vocational technology, home economics, shop)
- Basic life skills like budgeting and managing a household
- Financial literacy
- Leadership skills
- Practical workforce experience
- Self-awareness & reflection

One comment provided context for the entire question:

*“The key is for students to be able to answer how what they are learning will be meaningful and useful to them in order to solve real world problems, to be good employees and to be involved, caring community members.”*

### **Improving and Refining Educational Experiences to Best Prepare Students**

Participants in the survey provided a wide range of suggestions to help students leave the school system prepared to lead productive, satisfying lives.

1. Respect teachers' choices to measure students' achievement in non-standardized ways.
2. Offer programs to help teach and develop leadership skills.
3. Teach inclusion and practice reaching out to people who get left out time and again. Provide more exposure to students of other backgrounds, students of color. Have conversations with students of color, listen to their experiences and address those things. Teach the history of our Native People.
4. Educate the district staff, from the top down, about the experience that students of color and students in poverty are having and how to deal with those issues. Figure out a way to bridge the gap between different cultures at school and at home.
5. Provide opportunities to experience the world and cultures outside of Grand Rapids and Itasca County.
6. Class sizes must be smaller to enable more effective learning.
7. Incorporate mental wellness as a priority for students in school, including art.
8. Staff and teachers should model what it is like to be a compassionate human being.
9. Provide more hands-on learning. Sitting at a desk all day is not necessarily the best way for everyone to learn; we need more differentiated learning.
10. Make sure the kids are safe in school; do not tolerate bullying.
11. Pay our teachers better. Better pay will decrease turnover, and we'll be able to attract better teachers. That would go a long way to making our educational experience better.
12. Offer more life skills classes to get students better prepared for the workforce.
13. Teens today seem to struggle a lot with interpersonal communication and building relationships. Yet, many entry-level jobs are found in the customer-service industry. How are these two worlds to mesh?
14. Take a hard look at classes and what those classes mean to students' lives.

### **Strengthening Relationships between Educational Systems and Communities**

Following is a list of advice and suggestions for how ISD 318 might strengthen and improve relationships with the communities served by the district. The school district was complimented by many people for the communications efforts already being made, especially as the district navigated the COVID pandemic. Not surprisingly, communications suggestions comprised more than half of the responses.

- *“This past year has been tough with trying to communicate issues around COVID, but I think the school board did a good job of opening up and listening to the community. I’m guessing they’re hearing about many other topics besides COVID. The new elementary schools really do a good job of opening up communications, and the district’s social media presence has been very good.”*
- *“When I look at ISD 318, I think their communications effort has been excellent: Peach Jar, emails, mass phone messaging, Facebook, Matt’s live Q&A sessions.”*
- *“Look for more opportunities to encourage conversation, to grow common ground so people can talk about the issues important to the community. During these conversations, exhibit a greater willingness to truly listen to what people have to say.”*
- *“Provide information to the community at large in a variety of formats and offer information about key issues at a macro level.”*
- *“Consider hosting community dinners, where over a meal district leaders could talk about education and how the district is working to be more responsive to the needs of the community. At the same time, solicit ideas about how the education system is working.”*

With the district’s population changing (i.e., aging), reaching people without any personal or family connections to the schools becomes more problematic and more imperative. Nearly one-third of the people interviewed did not have a personal connection to the school. People will be supportive if they understand the needs of the district and a plan for addressing those needs is presented clearly. People commented on mechanisms to connect the school with the community.

- *“We talk about building community; this is the place to start so that people feel empowered. When you feel a sense of ownership of your community, you invest in it (literally) and engage with it. How does the school help in creating community? Engaging parents more fully is one step.”*
- *“Information about what’s going on at individual school buildings is best targeted to parents.”*
- *“Welcome parents and families to be physically present in the schools to build relationships.”*
- *“We cannot communicate enough. The divisiveness during the last school board election in our community was readily apparent. I think it was also apparent that we need more public forums and roundtables for the district to talk about the need to change the curriculum to address these needs. I think the district should look for more opportunities to encourage conversation, to grow that common ground so people can talk about these things. Also, as our population changes and we become more of a retirement community, we need to figure out how to message those folks that they have a vested interest in the outcomes of our schools.”*

Developing a cultural component of the district’s curriculum was suggested by a few people.

- *“We white people know where we came from, but that can’t be said for everyone; we white people have some work to do.”*
- *“Keep improving relationships with our Native people.”*

Administrative support for the teachers and school district staff was mentioned in several contexts.

- *“School leadership (superintendent and school board) should take a more active stance on issues like masking so the teachers feel more supported and so they, in turn, can support the students.”*

- *“The schools are a safe haven for many students, and teachers play a role beyond the one they signed up for. Make sure you have talented individuals to serve in those roles, and find ways to support them and pay them what they’re worth.”*

Most people understand the need to support the schools financially, and because of that they want to be engaged at a level that informs them about key issues without too much extraneous data.

- *“The school district has a whole host of communications vehicles that work well, but what’s needed now is some honest community engagement. This would create a strong community. The district needs to take time to listen, and gain the trust of the entire community. What do students need, and how do we deliver that? What are different ways people can be involved as opposed to being on a committee? What are the softer ways people can be involved?”*

Without question, our schools are the heart of the communities they serve. They touch more lives on any given day than any other community institution, and they have significant influence on our future.

# ISD 318

# COMMUNITY

# SURVEY SUMMARY



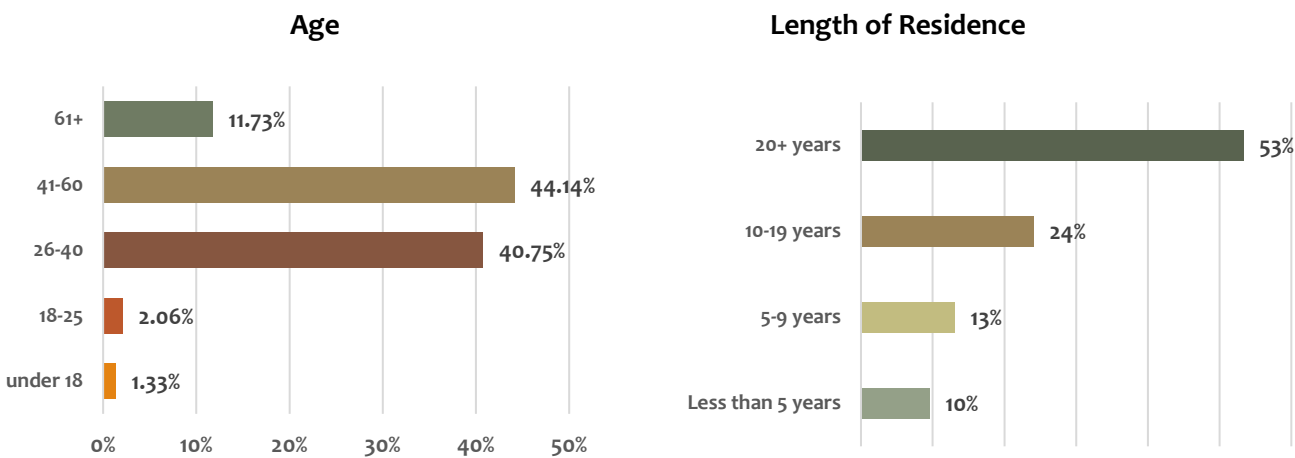
March 2022

# COMMUNITY SURVEY SUMMARY

## OVERVIEW

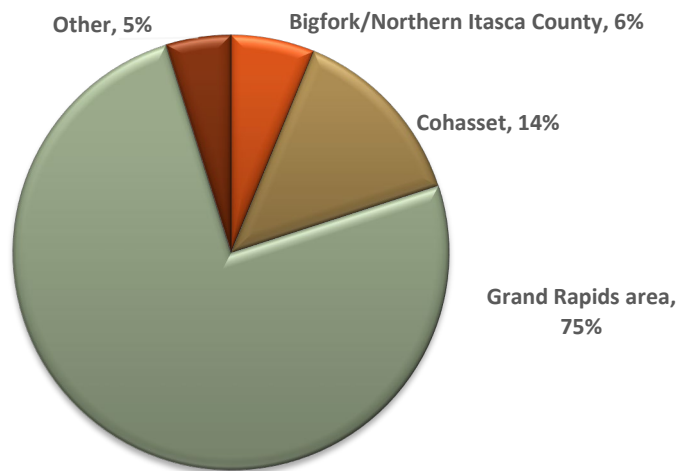
ISD 318 disseminated an online survey in February 2022 to gather demographic and attitudinal information from parents of ISD 318 students and the community at large; 832 people responded in a 21-day period.

## Demographic Context



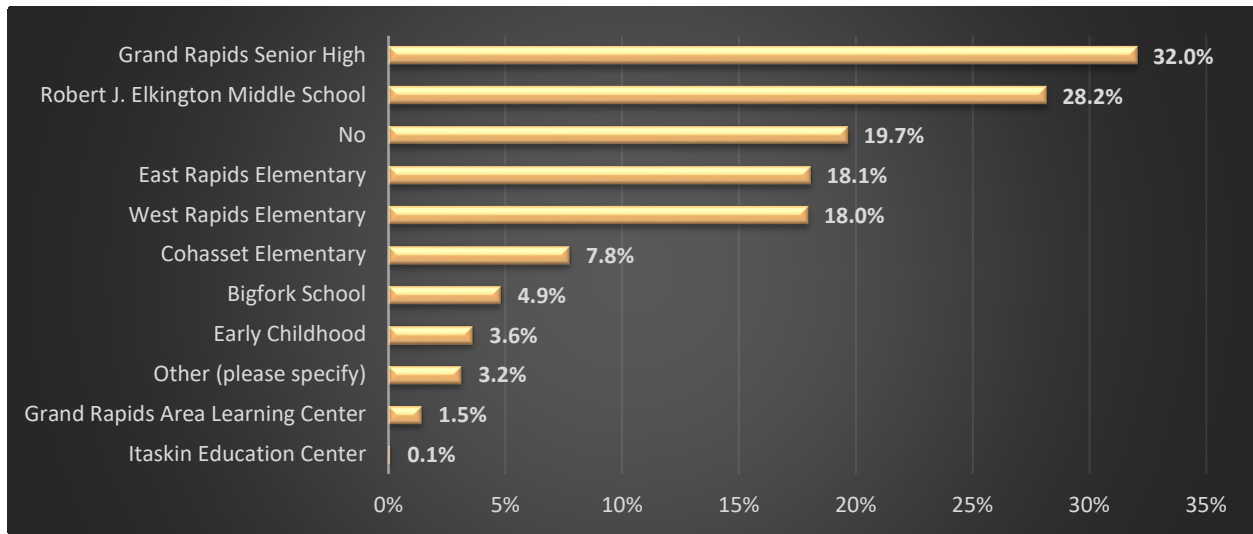
## Residence

*In which area do you live?*



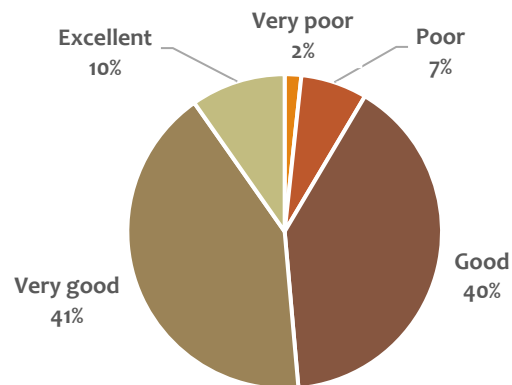
## School Attendance

Does anyone in your household currently attend any of the schools in ISD 318?

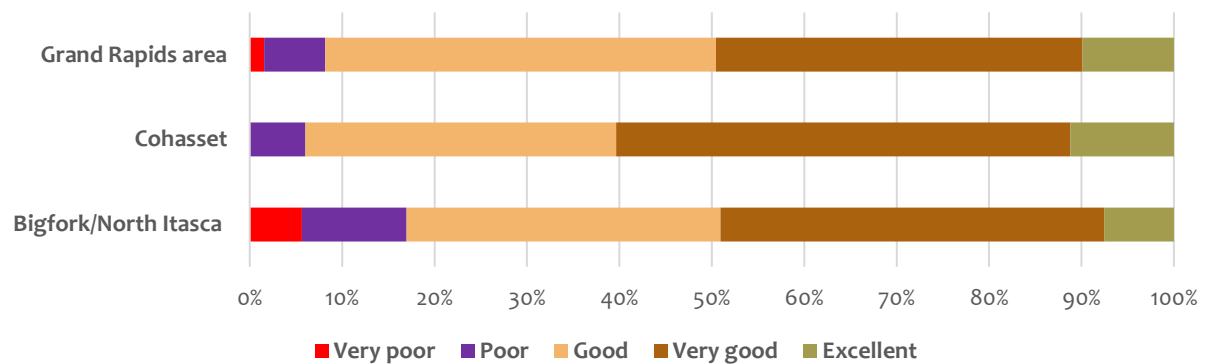


## Perceptions of Education Quality

How would you characterize the quality of the education offered to students in ISD 318?

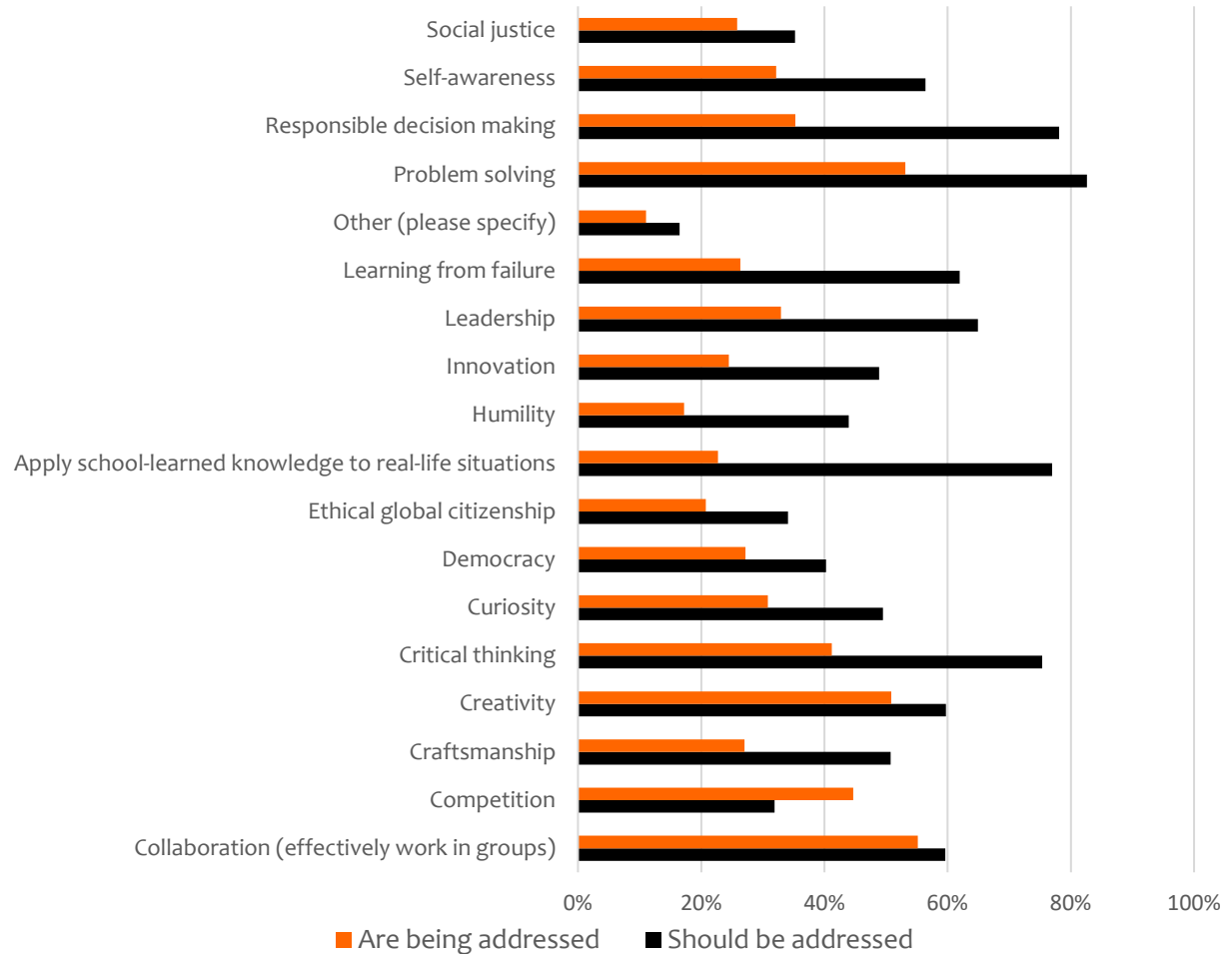


## Perception of Education Quality by Area

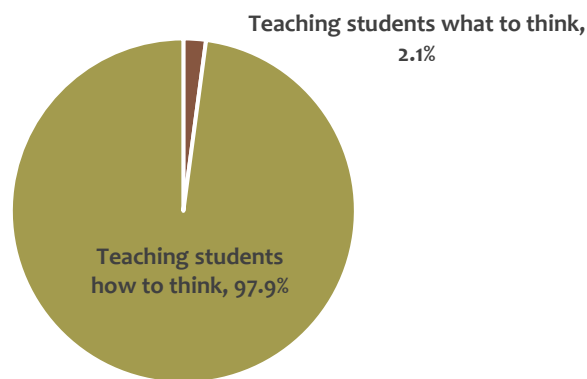


## Perspectives About Education Content

Which skills and attributes do you think should be addressed in the ISD 318 schools? Which skills and attributes do you think are being addressed in the ISD 318 schools?



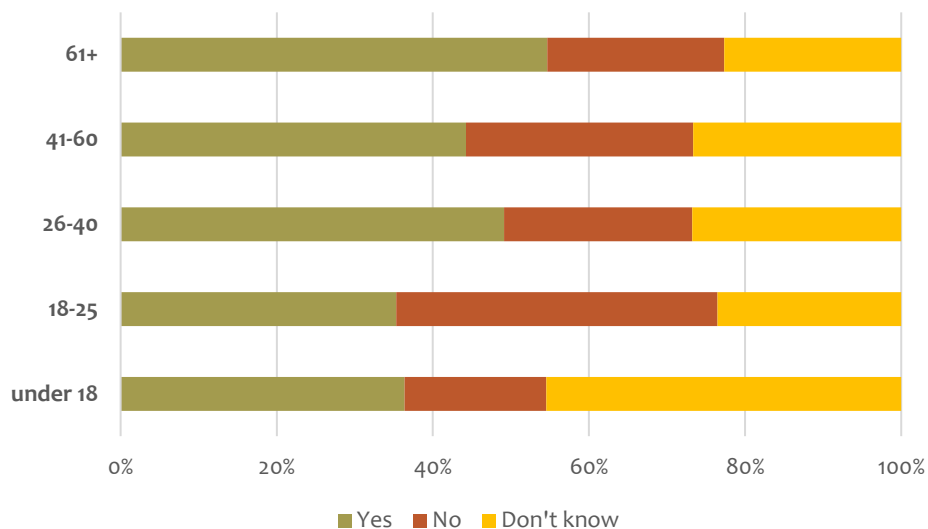
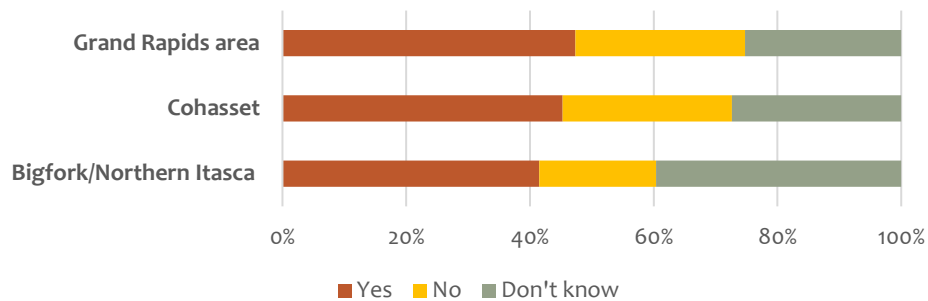
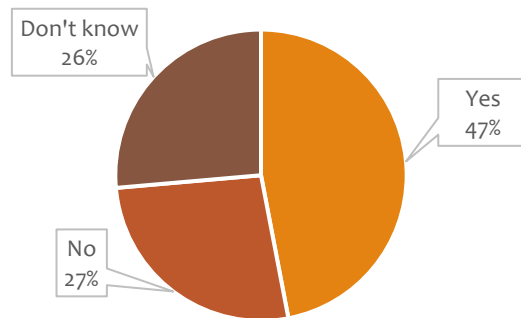
Which is more important: teaching students what to think, or teaching students how to think?



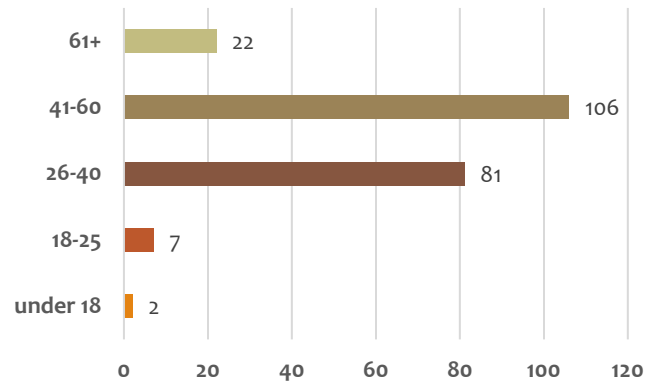
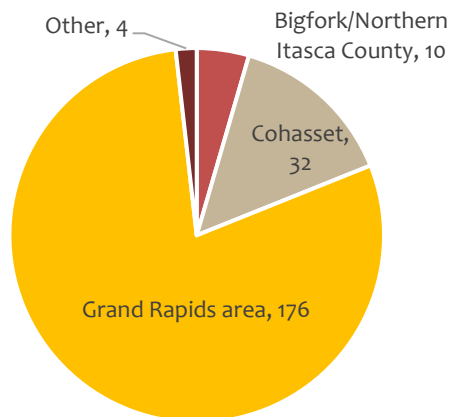


## Potential Levy Question

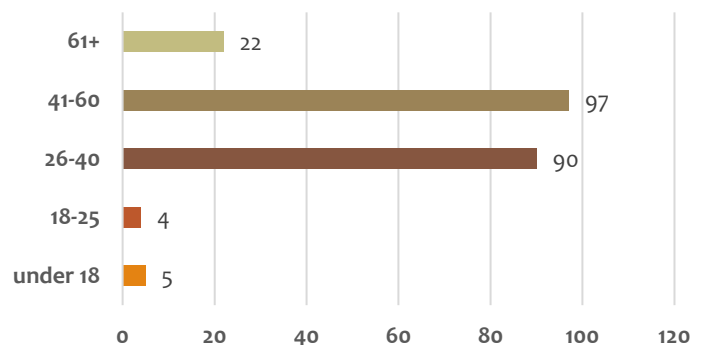
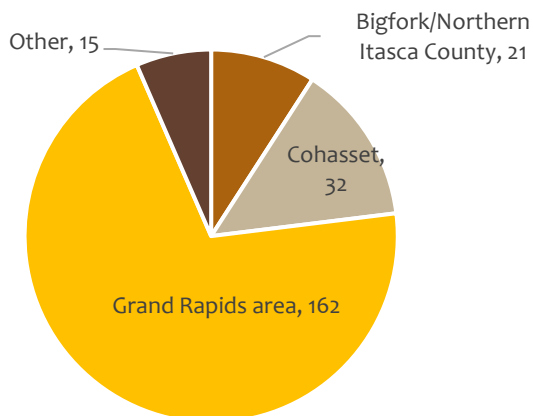
*In the future, if there was a proposed tax increase for school operating expenses such as transportation, utilities, classroom supplies, and salaries, or one of the goals you identified in Question #6, would you support it?*



## Potential 'No' Votes on Levy Question



## Potential 'Don't Know' Votes on Levy Question



## APPENDIX

### Other Comments (Question 6)

Of the 832 respondents, 134 people provided additional comments to Question #6 (“Which skills and attributes do you think should be addressed in the ISD 318 schools?”). Following is a summary of the comments grouped by themes.

#### What to Teach

##### **Subjects**

- Math, science, history, cursive, civics, the arts
- American history and government
- How about reading, writing and arithmetic? Respect for life!
- History and culture of MN tribal communities and treaty rights
- Government and our constitution
- Civics
- Stick to teaching reading, writing, math and science.

- Work to improve student math skills
- Reading, writing and math
- Independent living skills (cooking, meal planning, budgeting, financial accountability)
- Civics, American history, patriotism
- The only thing you should be teaching our kids in schools are the basics: reading, writing and arithmetic, social studies, civics, real history
- History, reading, math, science
- United States Constitution
- Elementary grades Spanish
- Math, English, Science, Geography, True History, Shop, Home Ec., Foreign Languages, Music, Art
- US American history
- Music

### **Life Skills**

- How to balance a checkbook. If the students want to stay in Grand Rapids, encourage that and what jobs can they get here. Encourage owning your own business. If they leave for college and want to come back here, make sure they pick something that they can get a job for when they come back. Life has changed, not everyone needs a degree and I think as a community we need to support that. We have so many great people that can learn without degrees.
- Basic life skills, taxes, resumes, interviews, budgeting
- Personal finance
- Finance education
- Money management & investing
- Home economics, basic shop skills and first aid
- Life skills and money management
- Financial literacy
- Finance
- Financial responsibility
- Money management, taxes
- Financial skills
- Basic finances
- Home economics
- Finances
- Real life learning such as finances, cooking, and job preparation
- Life skills (unfortunately one of many things not taught well enough at many homes)
- Business, financial and computer skills
- Organization skills! Time management, effects of drugs & alcohol on the developing brain
- Life skills: cooking, sewing, how to change a tire, keep a bank account, budgeting, real life needs

- Nursing education, diabetic food alternatives
- Physical education
- Other alternative education
- The basics: reading, writing (spelling) and arithmetic. Cursive writing, telling time.
- Unbiased political lessons
- We need the schools to remove the politics from the classrooms, and just teach our children math (not Common Core; they will never use it in real life), science, and history (what actually happened, not a jaded view).
- God, pledge of allegiance, truth of our history
- Math, science, American history, world history, music, fitness, agriculture, economics, biology, the Constitution.

- Independent work
- Life skills- cooking -sewing- investing
- Independence
- Home ec
- Life skills
- Life skills such as balancing finances, filing taxes, applying for a job, interviewing, healthy food choices and how to read food ingredients, how to make an appointment, how to fact check information with reliable sources.
- Cooking, drivers ed like they use to
- Having kids prepared to go into the workforce right after HS. Also need to teach basics like balancing checkbooks, loans, etc.
- Teach the kids basic life skills
- Life skills such as how to manage money
- How to pick and apply to colleges, how to decide what career field to choose, how to save for retirement, and budget
- Bring sewing, cooking, and all life essentials back
- All the soft skills that employers require
- Life skills
- Cooking, nutrition
- Home making-cooking-budgeting-small home repairs-hanging pictures, etc.
- Home-ec
- Real life budget skills, communication skills beyond an electronic device
- Sewing, home ec
- Firearms safety
- More options for trade school training

### ***Social, Emotional, Behavioral***

- Compassion, empathy, and inclusiveness
- Racism, treatment of kids that aren't white. This needs to be addressed so all kids feel included and not "othered". This is a serious issue and has many consequences for the child being treated poorly by other students.
- Confidence and independence
- Personal responsibility
- Empathy
- Social skill, conflict mediation, personal responsibility
- Responsibility
- Interpersonal communication, managing and taking responsibility for self and emotions, understanding and respecting others
- Resourcefulness for lifelong learning
- Grit
- Appropriate social behaviors/interaction
- How to have tough conversations respectfully, how to disagree with someone while still respecting them as a human
- Prepare students to be independent, critical- thinking, problem solvers!
- Responsibility, respectful, kindness, safety
- Emotional wellness
- Bullying
- Accountability, bullying, faith
- How to deal with being bullied
- Health of physical, mental, emotional, whole- being
- How to show respect to others
- Effective communication
- Accountability
- Free play, restorative communication
- Resilience and perseverance; also, the dangers inherent to social media for society - it's such a huge part of their lives and it's barely addressed
- Self-expression
- Friendship skills
- Social responsibility and civic duty
- Freedom!!!!

### ***Mental Health***

- I don't think it's anyone's fault, but we moved to Itasca County early in 2017 and the adjustment has been very difficult for my daughters. The student population and there is a passive aggressive culture of bullying. It also feels like my daughter has been forgotten by the school during the pandemic. Her mental health is in a terrible state and teachers don't seem to understand that even after having conversations with her guidance counselor. There is more to life than just high school and I wish ISD 318 would just focus on the health of the students and put academics aside for the time being
- Mental illness
- #1 - Mental health!!!! Please, please; for students AND staff!

### ***Diversity, Equity and Inclusion***

- Better ways to accommodate or modify to better help those with disabilities of all types, especially when it comes to extracurricular activities so that those with a disability aren't feeling like they are overlooked and that they are less than those who are not disabled, just because someone is disabled with mobility or other way, if they are capable of doing something others can, but may have a small disability, don't just put them in a role that you think would best suit them, but help them maybe achieve a role that could let them be in a leadership role.
- Diversity throughout our nation and globally
- LGBTQIA+ topics
- Cultural responsibility
- Equity, advocacy, respect, celebrating diversity
- Diverse perspectives on human experience
- Culture

### ***Racial & Social Justice***

- Actual US history on slavery and racism (despite CRT fear-mongering)
- Racial equality
- The country's true history, bad and all.
- Critical race theory
- Please teach critical race theory
- Critical race theory
- Racial justice
- Please teach critical race theory! We are in a dominantly white area where views are old and racist.

### ***Opposition to Racial & Social Justice***

- Not critical race theory, not your sexual identity and sure as hell no political agenda and no historical revisionism!
- Not social justice
- NO critical race theory. Social justice is hate, do not teach it! Teach the facts. Teach pro-America.
- Stick to the basics; leave the social agenda out of education
- Academics...don't need any liberal indoctrination!!!

### ***Environment & Climate***

- Global climate crisis
- Environmental stewardship and climate change
- Environmental stewardship

### **Suggestions on How to Teach**

- Engaging students in lectures and not creating busy work.
- Move away from lecture-based teaching and move towards collaboration, team problem solving, and creativity
- HOW to think, not WHAT to think
- Just throwing kids into groups doesn't work. They need to be watched, one person doing the work for a group doesn't work; happens constantly. When sports kids are failing, it's important to pull the sport, letting them fail and continue sports does no good for the child in learning!
- Better teaching in core classes and teachers willing to set aside time for struggling students.
- small group work based on ability

### **Additional Comments**

- All of these things!
- Education
- Class of 73, I'm a retired teacher in Washington State. I taught IB classes. GR has a great program from what I can see. Only have a kinder and 2nd grader and Bigfork is amazing so far!
- Just started this school and it's great so far.
- Get teachers that care, get disrespectful/disruptive students out of the classroom.
- How do you teach someone to be innovative? You can't tell someone to be innovative. It's not actionable.
- Stop spending MONEY.
- Reading and writing is below par
- I don't think some of these items are in the purview of schools. Can "humility" be "taught"? And "self-awareness"? Also, I think that "responsible decision-making" is a product of critical thinking.
- This is a very poor question. All aspects are important, I've selected the 5 that I feel are most important to making adult decisions. All of the answers proposed are intertwined.
- This is a hard to answer question in this format.
- Facts about the pandemic and how to mitigate it with tools such as vaccines and masks.
- My child has been out of school twice this year for 2 weeks at a time. This time he was positive for COVID and was vaccinated. The school district needs to take better precautions against all illnesses!

### **Other Comments (Question 7)**

Out of 832 respondents, 74 people provided additional comments to Question #7 ("Which skills and attributes do you believe are currently being addressed in the ISD 318 schools?"). Following is a summary of those comments by themes.

#### ***Comments about skills and attributes people believe are currently being taught, or should be (26 responders).***

- Can only speak to band/choir- which are EXTREMELY IMPORTANT
- Math, reading, music, sciences
- Too much of a focus on math, literacy and tests. Not well rounded.
- Teaching them to take a state test
- Too much emphasis placed on "readiness" for college
- A lot of worksheets, little time to interact with peers in a nonacademic focused setting

- How to complete worksheets
- Basic education required by the state of MN
- Memorization, learning of past facts, skills that don't translate to life outside of school
- Basic 3 Rs
- I do believe ISD 318 feels they are addressing all of the topics above. However, I do not believe it is being taught effectively in a way that the majority of students are actually reaping the benefits. They seem to be indulging in overstimulating drama and sexuality more than actually understanding how to take what is trying to be taught and how to apply that information into useful knowledge. ISD 318 seems to let a lot of kids fall through cracks of a broken society's school system.
- An imbalance of too much STEM emphasis
- Depending on the teacher you will receive most of these. However, MANY teachers need to be taught these themselves.
- Again, the only thing that should be taught in the school is the basics. Reading, writing and arithmetic social studies and civics and real history. One of the biggest failures in district 318 is the failure to stop the racism and bullying particularly to minorities. Solutions have been brought to the school board to administrators and they do nothing.
- Positive communication
- Safety and kindness and helpfulness to others.
- Gun safety
- What good real journalism is; how to tell when their source is biased with an agenda. The same thing is happening in this country today with a lot of biased propaganda. It is the same thing that happened to the good German people that were misled and caused WW2 in which millions perished because of biased journalism that was not true journalism.
- Financial responsibility
- Kindness
- Teach archery
- Get trap shooting going
- More wood and metal shops
- Business, financial and computer skills
- Homework - I have Kindergarten and 3rd graders, neither have homework.
- How to teach self
- Let them be creative. Hands on. What can they do? Let them find what they are good at.

***Skills and attributes being currently taught are based on a social or political agenda (10 responders)***

- Leftist socialist agenda, CRT and anti-American values, inappropriate sex ed at all levels, including gender fluidity
- Complacency, do as you're told, communism
- If Critical Race Theory is being taught in our schools, stop it. Is that what you mean by "critical thinking?" Don't teach kids to judge by color of skin, rather teach them the importance of character, integrity, earning a good reputation, being kind & compassionate and to believe they can do anything they set their mind and will toward. Hard work and persistence are key to success.
- Teaching kids how to be racist
- Education looks pretty much the same as it did 50 years ago. White board vs black board.
- Why even teach Spanish? It's the farthest away from us... spoken by the poorest people.
- Liberal philosophies
- Too much Marxist activism
- Teachers should be teaching our children history (based on the past and not what teachers want to teach), social studies, geography, English, literature, Etc. None of these critical race theories are based on equity, diversity and inclusion. Kids are different. Some kids will be smarter than others. Don't change the standards to accommodate the needs of a certain class. We are all different.
- Social justice is a fake cause. Stop teaching that bullshit. Because it is not how the world works.
- CRT. I know you don't label it, but it is present, and more parents are becoming aware.

***All of the skills and attributes are being addressed in some way (5 responders).***

- All in some small way.
- All
- What I see so far is all
- All of the above
- All in some form or another but I haven't seen many genuine attempts go too far beyond the curriculum

***None of the skills and attributes are being addressed (6 responders).***

- None, cause Rapids sucks in general for the schooling system and they don't care about the student base
- None
- None
- Nothing
- NONE of these.
- Minimum competency addresses NONE of these concerns effectively.

***We don't know which skills and attributes are being addressed (29 responders).***

- Don't have family attending school yet so I feel my answers would be uninformed
- I cannot answer as I do not know the curriculum
- I'm not present in the daily teaching / activities so it's tough to judge
- I don't think I could say based upon information received from school
- Several boxes have not been checked because I do not have specific experience with the topic in the school district.
- Have not seen the curriculum to assess
- Who knows? We only get back worksheets.
- Hard to determine with young children
- Just moved here with no basis to say.
- I don't know
- Not sure
- ?
- I do not know
- I don't know most of this info.
- I don't know. I don't have children in the school system and never have.
- Not sure
- I'm sure most, just not aware.
- Unsure
- Don't know
- I'm not exactly sure
- I'm not sure. I don't see much evidence of any of the above.
- Unable to say

## COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUPS

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### Executive Summary

During March and April 2022, three focus groups comprised of community members from Grand Rapids, Cohasset and the Bigfork area were convened. The sessions included 8 to 20 people and lasted for 45 to 60 minutes. The focus groups were an opportunity to listen to expectations community members have about the educational experiences of area students and to discover ways in which the district could continue improving relationships between schools, families and communities. The discussions revolved around two questions:

- *How can the ISD 318 schools (Bigfork, Cohasset and Grand Rapids) improve and refine educational experiences to best prepare students to meaningfully compete and contribute in the future?*
- *What suggestions do you have for how we might improve the relationships between schools and families and communities?*

The following is a summary of the themes from each focus group by community.

### Bigfork Focus Group Findings

The Bigfork focus group discussion revolved around the following themes.

- The community served by the Bigfork school does not have representation on the school board and community members feel isolated from the larger district.
- The educational experience provided by the Bigfork school is perceived as an afterthought. Cultivation of meaningful relationships between the district administration and the community is needed.
- The cuts made by the district disproportionately affect the Bigfork school.

***The community served by the Bigfork school does not have representation on the school board and community members feel isolated from the larger district.***

*“I was involved with a school board committee, and I was told Bigfork is parasitic and that we should vote to leave the district. People act like we are the poor, stupid cousin living up north. Like the school in Bigfork is sucking resources from and draining the district. We have no voting rights on the school board.”*

*“We have never had designated representation from Bigfork on the school board. We have no voice at the school board table. We are shut out. How can that be changed?”*

*“Historically Bigfork has always been isolated from the district. We are the poor cousins up north.”*

*“It doesn’t seem like there is any collaboration with the Bigfork school. Are there ways we could work together with Grand Rapids to provide our kids with more opportunities?”*

***The educational experience provided by the Bigfork school is perceived as an afterthought. Cultivation of meaningful relationships between the district administration and the community is needed.***



*“It feels like we are a little island up here and that we have to advocate for ourselves with the larger district.”*

*“Have on-going listening sessions in different locations.”*

*“Cultivate relationships with us and our students in an active, meaningful way.”*

*“Bigfork doesn’t get much recognition on behalf of the district. We need to see more transparency. How are the students at our school doing? How do we know the district cares about the wellbeing of our students? How are our students doing compared to Grand Rapids students?”*

*“I graduated from Bigfork and came back to raise my family here. When I was in school the extracurricular options were strong and an important part of my educational experience. Now there are hardly any options for the kids. We don’t have swimming or lacrosse like they do in Grand Rapids. Today the music department is barely making it, but when I was in school the music department was the shining star. How can we as parents bring attention to the fact that the music department is failing and needs to be revived? It is critical for our kids. It is critical for our community.”*

*“We no longer have a JV football team because there aren’t enough kids.”*

#### **The cuts made by the district disproportionately affect the Bigfork school.**

*“The cuts that are happening are disproportionate to Bigfork because of our size. The district makes it seem like it is really expensive to educate remote, rural people/places, but our sparse population enables the district to receive sparsity aid dollars from the State.”*

*“We keep cutting more and more. You are milking a dry cow. Staffing issues are causing scheduling problems. Without enough staff to teach all the classes, the scheduling of classes starts overlapping, which then makes it impossible to offer all the different advanced classes.”*

*“We want to prepare our students for the future by offering the best education possible. The school is the heart of our community, and we have a hospital, but it is hard to get people to come live and work here if you don’t have a great school or the school is dwindling.”*

*“Once something is cut it can’t be brought back. How much cutting can we do before there is nothing left?”*

*“We must pursue technology to enable us to offer students parallel academic choices. Is someone assigned to look at those options?”*

*“I know of a collaboration among small school districts in southern Minnesota that offer a STEAM camp (STEM plus arts). Could we look into offering something like that by working with other districts?”*

#### **Cohasset Focus Group Findings**

The Cohasset focus group discussion yielded the following themes.

- Teach kids basic skills and offer programs and courses to prepare them for work available in the area.
- Find new ways to connect with the community because people’s lived experiences are different today than they were in the past.

- The students need to be disciplined.

**Teach kids basic skills and offer programs and courses to prepare them for work available in the area.**

*“Bring back teaching skills kids can use in their lives”*

*“Teach people basic math, not with a calculator, because nowadays they can't do basic arithmetic.”*

*“Teach cursive. My 17-year-old grandson can't write and doesn't use cursive.”*

*“We need home-ec classes to teach boys how to cook and sew.”*

*“Teach the kids a skill that can get them a job at ASV.”*

*“Teach things that employees can use on their jobs.”*

*“Instead of pushing them to college, push them towards vo-tech.”*

*“The school district is trying.”*

**Find new ways to connect with the community because people's lived experiences are different today than they were in the past.**

*“Parents used to show up for school programs, but now both parents are working, and some parents have to work two jobs just to make ends meet. When do they have time to interact with the schools?”*

*“Schools need to find ways to connect with parents, but I'm not sure how to do that.”*

*“Lots of kids have nothing to do after school. The Boys and Girls Club and the Y are good places to go, if the kids can get rides home afterwards.”*

*“We used to have PTA meetings, and we got to know the teachers. Parent-teacher conferences were mandatory, but now a lot of parents don't bother to attend.”*

*“When we grew up, everyone was mainstreamed. There are now so many mandates, it costs more to build and staff our schools.”*

**The students need to be disciplined.**

*“Discipline the kids. You don't have to paddle their ass, but some structure is good.”*

*“It's a tough job for teachers nowadays; their hands are tied when it comes to maintaining discipline in their classrooms. People are sue-happy.”*

*“Parents don't feel like they can discipline; kids threaten they will call social services.”*

*“I have had to come to the school as a security officer to deal with an “out of control” 2nd grader. How has this happened?”*

### **Grand Rapids Focus Group Findings**

The Grand Rapids focus group discussion generated the following themes.

- Trade skills and life skills should be taught and encouraged.
- Is the school's curriculum one-sided?

- Teachers who care do make a difference, and we should pay our educators more and provide them with needed support.

**Trade skills and life skills should be taught and encouraged.**

“I'm concerned about the workforce; we're not giving trade skills their due. There are obstacles that need to be overcome to move towards adequately supporting the trades, and we need to figure that out.”

“I'm concerned there isn't enough emphasis on the trades; we don't need to suggest that everyone goes to college. Students should be prepared from their education to leave K-12 equipped to make a livable wage.”

“Teach them the trades and life skills like how to turn on the oven and make yourself a meal, or change a tire. What has failed when I have a kid come work for me and he doesn't know how to use or read a tape measure? The workforce needed for our area to make it into the future isn't there. There is a shortage of mechanics, plumbers, electricians, you name it.”

“We need kids who can count money and handle other job skills in the real world. Kids are entering the workforce at age 16 and don't even know how to count money.”

“I'm familiar with a multi-school district consortium (Traverse City, Michigan) that did a good job of offering a curriculum for kids who wanted to focus on trade skills.”

“Life skills are missing; people don't understand the importance of simply being presentable, showing up for work with some personal grooming and clean clothes.”

**Is the school's curriculum one-sided?**

“The new elementary schools are beautiful. They feel like social gathering spaces. But what is actually being taught behind those walls? We need to be sure the 'whole thing' is being taught, not just a part of the story. A lot of it seems one sided. We need to go back to teaching the basics of our country. How was it formed? What curriculum is being used is very important.”

“Socialism doesn't work, look at Venezuela! I read a poll that 60% of 18 to 24-year-olds in our country believe socialism is the way. I would strongly recommend if this is being taught to our students, it be stopped. And what news source do our schools rely on? They are fixated on CNN. Why? There are other news sources like Fox. CNN is a very one-sided view point. We don't have kids in the district, but we pay a lot in taxes. Let's bring back the pledge of allegiance to the classroom.”

“The woke society culture is permeating our schools. The counter culture seems to be in charge; people are tearing down statues all around the country.”

“We should not be encouraging transgender acceptance. Why would we put that in the curriculum? I don't want my grandkids learning this and being asked: 'Are you sure you are a boy?'”

“If you take God out of school, things don't go well.”

**Teachers who care do make a difference, and we should pay our educators more and provide them with needed support.**

“We need caring teachers, and we should pay our teachers more.”

“My favorite teacher in Grand Rapids high school was one who paid attention to me as a person; he showed me that he cared about me.”

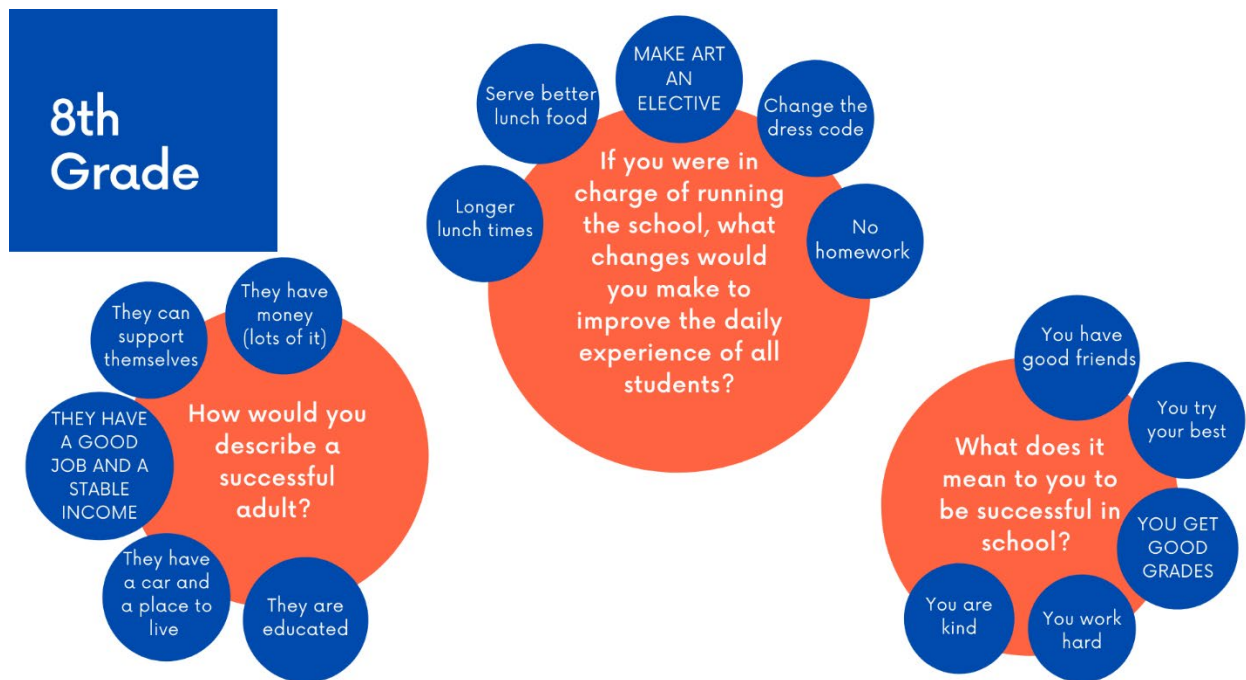
*“We need more teacher's aides in the classroom; we need more individual attention paid to students.”*

*“Since class sizes are so large, we need to get our educators the support they need.”*

*“We have big administrative challenges in our district that we have to figure out so that our educators are supported.”*

## STUDENT IDEATION SESSIONS

### 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Ideation Session Summary



*\*This graphic depicts the top five most common responses to each question; the responses in all capital letters were the most common responses to those questions.*

On February 15, 148 eighth-graders at Robert J. Elkington Middle School participated in an ideation session. They brainstormed ideas in response to the following list of questions.

1. How would you describe a successful adult? **221 responses**
2. What does it mean to you to be successful in school? **330 responses**
3. If you were in charge of running the school, what changes would you make to improve the daily experience of all students? **559 responses**

#### How would you describe a successful adult?

When asked how they would describe a successful adult, the eighth-graders generated 221 responses, and most envisioned someone with wealth (a “job” and “money”), giving the adult an ability to support themselves and be independent. Others commonly identified success by an adult’s possessions, particularly a house and an automobile. For a smaller but significant number of these students, success meant having a family or having attended college. Other less significant keywords used to describe a successful adult included ‘support,’ ‘happy,’ ‘kind,’ ‘loving,’ ‘fun,’ ‘goals’ and ‘respect.’

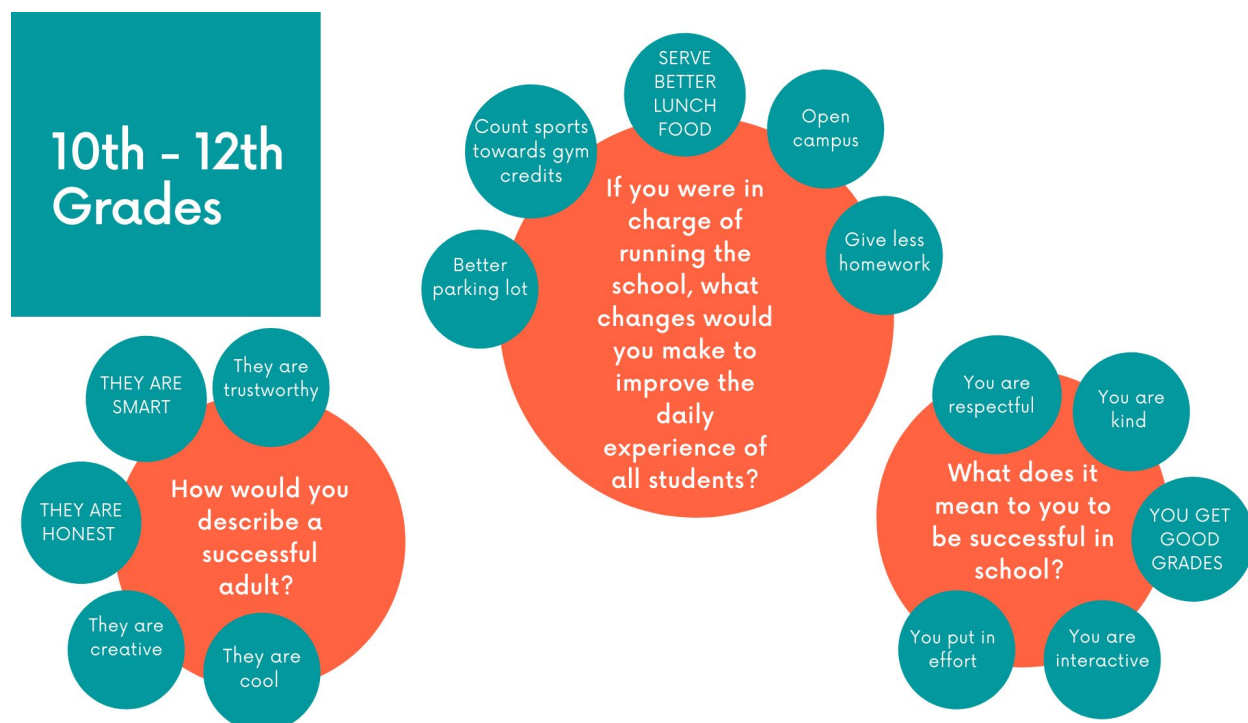
## What does it mean to you to be successful in school?

When asked what it means to them to be successful in school, the eighth-graders generated 330 responses. Of those 330 responses, more than 47% believe that being successful in school means getting good grades. Following close behind was ‘trying your best’ and ‘getting your work done.’ In addition, ‘being kind’ and ‘having good friends’ were common measures of success.

## If you were in charge of running the school, what changes would you make to improve the daily experience of all students?

When asked what changes they would make to improve the daily experience of all students, the students generated 559 responses. The most frequently mentioned response was to make art class an elective. Next was ‘allowing longer lunch times’ and—equally important to eighth-graders—‘to serve better lunch food.’ Last but not least, many eighth-graders would change or eliminate the dress code, allow girls to wear what they want, allow hats to be worn, and get rid of homework. One student noted: “Let’s have a less strict dress code, because if we have to worry about teachers being distracted, we should fire those teachers.”

### 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> Grade Ideation Session Summary



*\*This graphic depicts the top five most common responses to each question; the responses in all capital letters were the most common responses to those questions.*

On March 2nd, a mix of 54 tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders from Grand Rapids High School participated in an ideation session, brainstorming as many ideas as possible to the following list of questions.

1. *How would you describe a successful adult?* **224 responses**
2. *What does it mean to you to be successful in school?* **230 responses**
3. *If you were in charge of running the school, what changes would you make to improve the daily experience of all students?* **224 responses**

### **How would you describe a successful adult?**

Out of the 224 responses of 54 high schoolers who were asked to describe a successful adult, the two most commonly named characteristics are that successful adults are smart and honest. Interestingly, following closely behind “smart & honest” in the total number of common responses to describing a successful adult are all personal characteristics - successful adults are trustworthy, creative and cool. A fair amount of the responses (19%) identify a successful adult as someone who is financially stable, thinking and planning for retirement and able to support their family. Multiple responses also identified successful adults as educated, knowledgeable, hardworking, giving and respectful. As one student said, “successful adults contribute to society.”

### **What does it mean to you to be successful in school?**

Out of 230 responses to what it means to be successful in school, similar to the 8th graders, 54 high-schoolers, most commonly identified getting good grades as the highest indicator of what it means to be successful in school. Following close behind in number of times these attributes that were attributed to a successful adult are, 'you are kind,' 'you are respectful,' 'you put in effort,' and 'you are interactive.'

### **If you were in charge of running the school, what changes would you make to improve the daily experience of all students?**

Serving better lunch food is the number one most common response of the 224 responses to what these 54 high schoolers would change if they were in charge of running the school. Following closely behind are “less homework” and “count sports toward gym credits.” Additionally, the high-schoolers would make the high school an open campus so they could leave for lunch; they would also make a better parking lot; and help one another become better at parking their cars in the lot!

## RECENT ALUMNI INTERVIEWS

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Telephone interviews were conducted with recent alumni, people who've graduated during the years 2012-2021, from Grand Rapids and Bigfork schools. The individuals were referred by ISD 318 staff or community leaders. For the purposes of understanding the feedback, this report summarizes their observations based on their attendance at the Grand Rapids or Bigfork campuses.

The following questions were asked of all the people we interviewed:

1. *How would you describe your educational experience?*
2. *What was the most valuable part of your educational experience?*
3. *In what ways did your educational experience prepare you for the future?*
4. *For ISD 318 to provide students with the most impactful, effective, and meaningful student experience, what would need to change?*

### Grand Rapids alumni observations

#### 1) How would you describe your educational experience?

The vast majority of respondents from Grand Rapids were very complimentary of their educational experience: “very exceptional” and “very positive” are indicative of what most of the students offered as quick summaries of their high school experience. At the same time, all of the people interviewed participated extensively in extracurricular activities, and none of the students were members of families who experienced significant financial hardship. At least one student noted that the regular classes were ‘boring’ but noted that he didn’t consider himself a ‘great’ student.

- *It was a very positive experience. I had lots of opportunities, both in sports and academics, to participate as much as I wanted.*
- *I think my education was at a higher level than I experienced in college. I did IB classes that all transferred here to the college I'm attending now. Some of my friends from other cities didn't have the same opportunities, and it showed, especially in the first year of college. The teachers in Grand Rapids held me accountable, and that was helpful.*
- *My educational experience could be summed up as exploratory, creative, and purposeful. During my time at GRHS, I had the opportunity to work with a variety of teachers and support staff who all provided me with a supportive foundation and relationship. Quickly I learned... that they would always be willing to help even if they did not know the answer, they'd find someone who did.*

#### 2) What was the most valuable part of your educational experience?

Several key factors were noted by the respondents, and two of the most frequently mentioned were: 1) the relationships formed with teachers and other staff, and 2) the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities (sports, band, choir and others). Other key factors were: small class sizes that made interacting with other students and faculty easier and the preparation students received to succeed in college.

- *For me, being in a smaller community where I knew so many of my classmates was nice, and even at that I'll bet I met a new person every single day. I participated in three sports, and everyone supported everyone else. It was so cool. I have seen lots of kids come back home*



during the summers, and many kids I know return to volunteer in the high school with sports teams or other jobs. Clearly Grand Rapids is doing something right.

- *What made it valuable for me was the band and choir. Music helped me get out of bed every day. I thought the music program and the instructors--Gundy, Mr. Shrimpton and Michael Thursby--were outstanding.*
- *The community: Grand Rapids high school has a good sense of community. The involvement I had helped me form many great relationships with teachers and my peers, and that made my educational experience so much better.*

### **3) In what ways did your educational experience prepare you for the future?**

Most of the students responded with observations about how they applied the rigor of balancing academic work with life outside the classroom. Extracurricular activities were cited by nearly everyone as a key part of the learning experience, along with imparting life skills they use today.

- *Since some of my teachers were coaches, too, they provided great insights about balancing schoolwork with sports. School always came first. I was able to make the most of the activities the school offered. Some of the teachers participated in athletics in college, and they were great about advising me.*
- *Time management has carried over to my experience now as a college student. I am majoring in elementary education, and I've been well prepared for that.*
- *The preparation I received in Grand Rapids helped me above and beyond my other college classmates. The teachers' passion really made a difference, and I can say that Mrs. Lindstrom's passion for science helped me fall in love with science. It really helps to have teaching staff who do their best to motivate students. People have different learning styles, so what works for one person won't necessarily work for another.*
- *All three of these educators (Linder, Boedignheimer and Linnell) combined were the perfect example of lifelong learners who were on an adventure that prioritized the people around them. For me personally, this influenced my teaching philosophy as I entered the field of agricultural education.*

### **4) For ISD 318 to provide students with the most impactful, effective, and meaningful student experience, what would need to change?**

While the respondents all valued the education they received in Grand Rapids, nearly all had suggestions about how to make the experience more impactful and effective. Several referenced the importance of reaching students whose home lives make a traditional education more challenging, either for lack of support from parents at home, or because educational achievement is not valued or appreciated.

Others suggested that more preparation for life after high school would be helpful, particularly with basic life skills like understanding how to apply for loans and paying taxes. Providing mental health services and individual counseling were also seen as ways to make students' educational experience more impactful, and at least one person was fearful about being open about their sexual identity. There is also a recognition that not all students learn in the same way, and that having more approaches to learn—including hands-on learning—would be beneficial.

- *I appreciated teachers who would differentiate or put effort into updating their curriculum. Some of the teachers seemed to simply go through the motions. The teachers are role models, whether they know it or not, and kids would grow more if the teachers put more effort into what they taught.*
- *Another thing that should change is helping make sure people from lower income families can be educated. When I was in school, it was infinitely more unlikely that kids from families in or close to poverty would care about school. In fact, they were often flagrantly indignant about the whole ordeal. But kids who didn't want to be there, and the disrespect they showed for everything, made it difficult for me to learn. Itasca County has a lot of poverty; how can we help those kids from low-income families do well, to choose to be conscientious, and to succeed in school? I don't have the answer, but there must be incentives that would encourage poor (from an income perspective) students to do well.*
- *Provide options for students who want to do something besides a four-year degree. I remember that people were shamed for not wanting to go to a four-year college. I don't feel like it was a very welcoming place. I identify as bisexual, and I would never tell anyone who I went to school with or teachers that is how I identify. I don't want to deal with it, I think people are small-minded when it comes to things that are different or outside of mainstream norms.*

### Bigfork alumni observations

#### 1) How would you describe your educational experiences?

All the students interviewed described the most important, meaningful thing about their educational experiences in Bigfork was that they went to a small school with small class sizes resulting in their having good, meaningful relationships with the educators and school staff. One student did talk about feeling like there weren't enough extracurricular activities. Another student talked about the impression students from Bigfork have that, when compared to Grand Rapids students, the Bigfork students are stereotyped as "stupid and poor."

- *It was good. I think maybe there was a little less opportunity than there could have been, for one, in athletics. The number of students weren't there, and probably there was less class selection than a bigger school. These things made it seem like it was limited.*
- *It was fantastic. I had previously gone to a different school district from K-8 and then transferred to Bigfork and it was the best experience I ever had. The teachers were so personable and caring. It was just fantastic. The small school made it feel like home. My heart needed it.*
- *Good. I liked the teachers. I liked that it was a small school. Everyone knows you.*
- *Since I went to a small school, with small class sizes, I had a really good relationship with the majority of my teachers, and this made the whole experience great. I will say that there always seems to be some stereotyping that Bigfork students aren't as smart as Grand Rapids kids. Like we are just up here in the sticks, getting a weak education and everyone is poor. I was at the Dutch Room when the referendum for the two new elementary schools passed. I overheard a woman say that the only people who won't vote for this are people from Bigfork because they are poor and don't want to support Grand Rapids schools. I told her I was from Bigfork, and I voted 'yes.' That's just one example of stereotyping.*

- *Complicated. There were good days and bad days. The friend thing was difficult; you had to be something that you weren't. If your friends had boyfriends or girlfriends or in the popular group, you had to be really good at sports to be seen as a great person. That was difficult. Eventually I found some friends who were open minded when I started golfing. My favorite class was physics. I struggled in school; it took a lot for me to memorize things and tests were hard for me. But the teacher I had for physics was really good and math went ok too.*

## **2) What was the most valuable part of your educational experience?**

Again, all of the students interviewed found the most valuable part of their educational experiences was the fact that Bigfork is a small school where they had meaningful relationships with teachers who supported them educationally and emotionally. One student talked primarily about the value of being able to participate in any athletic opportunities that were available.

- *Getting to know the teachers better. Bigfork is a small school, so you get to know them really well. 90% of the time all the teachers knew me, they knew I was trying as a student, and they had a lot of trust in me. If I had to do it again, I would definitely prefer a small school because I struggled in school, so it was really great because I had teachers who knew me and helped me and had my back.*
- *Athletics. I played basketball, football, and was on the track team. I took sports the most seriously and looked forward to doing athletics.*
- *I learned a lot of people skills. I was a very shy person, and I came out of my shell in Bigfork. The teachers helped me in ways I can't explain. I went through tough family stuff in high school and the teachers were so caring and supportive and they would have lunch with me to make sure I was ok.*
- *I really liked the fact that it was a smaller school. One of the teachers used to be my dad's teacher and that was kind of neat.*
- *I really liked the small atmosphere: teachers getting to know students helped long term vs. being lost in a large classroom where it is impossible for teachers to know all the students. It was so much easier for the teachers to really get to know us and our families so they could support us and help us with social/emotional learning vs. just book learning, which I wasn't very good at.*

## **3) In what ways did your educational experience prepare you for the future?**

The students described how their educational experiences prepared them for the future. They mentioned that learning good social skills helped them interact with others after they graduated and moved to the next phases of their lives. One student discussed how taking shop classes led him to become an electrician in the area. A handful of the students reiterated how small class sizes enabled teachers to personally prepare them for the future by working on their individual needs.

- *It prepared me in a lot of ways. On one hand it prepared me with how to act with people. When you go to college, you're still young and it helped prepare me for that. It helped me be responsible, to be independent. In the real world you need to show up on time, be prepared for things, show up and do a good job.*
- *I would say shop class. I am an electrician now, and they had a good shop program. There was a lot of persuasion to go to a four-year school, versus going to a trade school. I think that trades*

and construction are a really good thing to lean kids toward. I have a hard time finding help and the trades are important.

- I struggled in math, but my math teacher made sure we had one-on-one time and made sure I comprehended things. I left high school and started working as a hospital administrator. I wouldn't have been able to do that with a different experience. My English teacher taught me how to come out of my shell and gave me a voice.
- I've never been really book smart, but I learned the most from teachers sharing with us about real life situations. Living in a small community, you know everyone and then you talk about stuff in a deeper way.

#### **4) For ISD 318 to provide students with the most impactful, effective, meaningful student experience, what would need to change?**

Most of the students wouldn't change much about their own educational experiences in terms of the value of a small-school setting. A few did talk about the importance of teaching students how to solve real world problems by focusing on real life challenges, making sure to give more to students who are struggling, and to offer as many opportunities as possible so the Bigfork students can receive an excellent education.

- Probably just have people be more respectful and responsible and change things so people have a better mindset. Give the kids who are struggling more help, and make sure the other kids understand that everyone has different learning abilities and that's ok. Get everyone on the wavelength to just be kind to one another, because you never know what other people's inside world is up to.
- I feel like the overall experience was good, but I think there is maybe a lack of opportunity. It's hard to realize that if you just drove 40 minutes south of here you would be able to access so many more classes and sport options.
- I wouldn't change anything. I would encourage it to always remain a small school. There are a lot of kids who need the smaller school setting. Other schools may have more options for extra curriculums, but they will never have the same ability to know the students and support each of them.
- I thought the principal was more concerned with being politically correct than actually helping students. I wanted him to take a stand rather than just try to please everyone. I guess I don't know if I would change that, but it made me think that I wished he would have stood up for something once in a while.
- I think we should be teaching kids how to handle real life situations, like managing money, taxes, investing, and also how to handle emotional growth as well. I got into college right when I was 18, and I was out on my own. Society expected me to already know what I wanted to do and most kids don't know and they fall off the deep end. I do wish there were more vocational schools that teach you skills and trades. A college degree makes you take a whole bunch of classes that you will never use and don't pertain to your life. I would change that. Also, rather than push kids to go right into college after they graduate, I would push them to go out and experience life a little; that's where you learn the most. I was going to be a teacher and got into that college track but then realized it wasn't for me. Then I went to work in the woods for a year and now I work for UPS; I am still figuring out what I really want to do.

## BIPOC INTERVIEWS

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As part of the community engagement process, the leadership of ISD 318 wanted to intentionally engage Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) living in communities served by the school district to better understand expectations they have for the educational experiences of area students. We conducted 13 interviews ranging from 15-60 minutes in length.

The people we interviewed were asked the following questions:

1. *What expectations do you have for the educational experiences of area students?*
2. *What suggestions do you have for ways in which ISD 318 could better foster and support diversity, equity, and inclusion in students' educational experiences in meaningful ways?*
3. *What suggestions do you have for how ISD 318 might improve school/family or school/community relationships?*
4. *From your perspective, how well does ISD 318 prepare students to succeed in the future?*

### **1) What expectations do you have for the educational experiences of area students?**

Many of the people interviewed for this phase of the community engagement expressed expectations similar to the hopes expressed by a wide range of students and parents throughout the school district: that our schools prepare students for succeeding in whatever endeavor or career they choose. Another common theme was encouraging the school district to be more open and proactive in welcoming and hosting conversations about cultural differences. Other expectations included preparing our students to be global citizens; to provide a safe and secure space for eight hours each day; and to teach students real-life skills like budgeting, managing finances and securing jobs.

- *I hope that students in ISD 318 see themselves as global citizens, not that they will necessarily travel globally or that they should leave and stay gone, but that they understand the context of where they live, work and play. Of course, they should receive education in reading, writing and math and science.*
- *I've always been disappointed that Indigenous studies are not offered. I think that's a huge missed opportunity. To achieve the objective of improving relations with our neighbors, it's important not just for Indigenous kids to have this education, but all students.*
- *I expect they will come to a safe, secure place for several hours five days a week. I expect that their teachers will be teaching to standards and to the best of their abilities. And I expect that teachers and students will be treated fairly, no matter what. And I could go on.*
- *Our educational exposure to Black history was a quick worksheet we completed on Martin Luther King Day. I think the school could do a much better job of teaching about the lives of Black people in America. Also, put more than one kid of color in each classroom. It's intimidating to be the only person of color. And when the class discusses topics like slavery in American history, it's awkward to have the teacher and all my classmates turn to me and ask: "How do you feel about it?" They should figure out some place else for us to be when they have discussions like that.*

- *I expect that teachers in ISD 318 will, as much as possible, care for the students they're asked to teach; that they will provide as more professional attention to their work as possible.*
- *I would say they should have an educational experience that makes our kids ready to move forward after high school and prepares them for the future to be successful in what they pursue, a well-rounded educational experience.*
- *We're preparing the next generation, and they need to be open to diversity. I want to encourage them to have open conversations about the differences between their culture and others. I look at the disparities in graduation rates of Native children vs. white children, and that opportunity gap is something we have to address, even if it's only one student at a time.*
- *To learn what is needed to make it in today's environment. Create opportunities for people based on their capacity and interests, whether its fixing cars or building computers, whatever. I feel like our district focuses on the low end rather than the high end. If you are lagging behind, or have a handicap, then you get the attention and support you need. We should also focus on making sure the kids at the top get attention. My grandson is in the middle school, and he is bored because school comes very easy for him. If kids have talent, grow it!*

## **2) What suggestions do you have for ways in which ISD 318 could better foster and support diversity, equity, and inclusion in students' educational experiences in meaningful ways?**

There were numerous suggestions about how ISD 318 could foster diversity, equity and inclusion in meaningful ways. Three themes represent roughly half of the comments: 1) celebrate cultural differences; 2) be more welcoming; and 3) provide time for more DEI training and education for ISD 318 teachers and staff.

Others suggested the school district should be more proactive on this issue: 1) by encouraging staff to adhere to existing standards about incorporating diversity and inclusion in the curriculum; 2) to treat all students fairly and not show favoritism to athletes; and 3) by respecting concerns voiced by students about intolerance among their peers.

- *Other than maybe Mrs. Hall, I can't think of a single example where diversity, equity and inclusion were mentioned or discussed in school. Compared with workplace standards today, where I spend an hour each month implementing DEI standards among my work team, there was nothing mentioned during my high school career. I think teachers should absolutely be trained; there should be standards that the schools must follow; and DEI should be integrated into every conversation. The students should have at least quarterly exposure to these topics.*
- *I think presenting the expectation of fostering diversity, equity and inclusion to staff should come first, because if we haven't done that work with the teachers it certainly won't happen with our students. We've done some things to make progress, and I would say the environment is changing, but we have a way to go. The culture is different in different buildings.*
- *Put kids of color together. Listen to them when they say they feel uncomfortable about something. Don't minimize or downplay an incident just because you don't think it was that big a deal or that I shouldn't have been offended because "they didn't mean anything by it." My brother had an issue in the school, and nothing was done about it.*
- *I like to go to parent-teacher conferences and ask our son's teachers what they're doing with Indigenous studies. Inevitably we get a blank stare in response to that question. Our teachers*

are not equipped to teach those subjects at this point. The curriculum is so focused on standards, not looking at a more holistic approach to educating our children. I think there is an opportunity for ISD 318 to lead, to provide education about all cultures, not just Indigenous. I'd encourage ISD 318 to be open to diversity and not give in to the prejudices that exist.

- Erase all the boundaries that divide us. Education should be an opportunity for everyone regardless of race, class, gender. We are so divided and fixated on this as a society that it is unhealthy. No matter who you are, you should get a quality education. I think the way the system is set up keeps people divided. I do think there are some people who are treated better than others, like hockey players. Some sports get a lot of resources, which is fine as long as all the other ones do as well. How do we blend the lines? If you don't play hockey, but love chess, how can we give you those same resources so you succeed at playing chess?
- Our area lacks a lot of diversity, so this is a difficult question. Maybe if they could incorporate access to different cultures in classes besides just in their language classes, if they could either provide a course specific to world cultures, that would be awesome.

### **3) What suggestions do you have for how ISD 318 might improve school-family or school-community relationships?**

There are a limited number of ways that community organizations like ISD 318 can build trust and improve relationships with community members, and the respondents identified many of them. Educating the community through clear, consistent communications was mentioned by a third of the respondents as a means of improving relationships with the community and families.

At least three suggestions were repeated from responses to other questions in the interviews: 1) asking school administrators for zero tolerance for racist behavior or comments; 2) creating spaces for students; and 3) urging school administrators to be aware that school building leadership is not uniformly compliant with expectations to provide access to Indian education services.

- First, there should be zero tolerance for racism. Secondly, and borrowing from the Chicago school district's approach, schools are supposed to be a safe place in a student's world. At least we should strive to make that happen, to control something we can control.
- Clarity of communications would be the biggest single improvement I could suggest. We can always do better to make sure families better understand what we're trying to do and how we plan to do it. I'm not sure how we can make that happen, but it's been my experience that if people have better information, they are more likely to be supportive of what you're doing.
- You can see the differences in how our services are perceived on a building by building basis, which really means people in those buildings are treating us and our students differently. The Middle School, in particular, is more challenging: we have some teachers refusing to release students to participate in Indian Education programs. And this happens even after parents have submitted written requests to allow their children to participate. It's a management issue. The administration and school board have been amazingly supportive, however.
- You have to be aware that when you're "driving while Black," things can go bad. Young Black kids should be taught how to behave in those situations. It sounds terrible, but maybe a parent of a Black family could lead a course about dealing with the oppression of the system. I don't want Grand Rapids to be the focus of a news story about how a small town didn't treat people of color well. A couple of other ideas: maybe hosting a Juneteenth festival where Black culture could be celebrated. It also would help to re-educate the police force.

- *When it comes to extracurricular activities that enabled me to become engaged with community members, through band and sports and community theater, we were given robust options to help us as students become engaged with other community members. I hope they continue to offer programs like that--and more--that put students in touch with the community in real time.*
- *I do feel as far as families go, the district does a good job communicating. I would like to see them be more involved with the community, something like a community garden where they could work on a project with the community on and give back to the community in a different way.*

#### **4) From your perspective, how well does ISD 318 prepare students to succeed in the future?**

A quarter of the respondents believe the school district prepares students well to succeed in the future. However, an equal percentage believe that while the district does well for students from stable homes where a culture of success has been nurtured, it underserves students at either end of the achievement spectrum. There is a strong sense that we must do much more for families in poverty.

Themes identified in other questions were reiterated: we should ensure students leave high school with far better financial literacy (paying taxes, budgeting and managing money) than most students demonstrate today.

- *I think communications from the school district are clear and adequate. However, the more the administration and school board can do to be open to hearing feedback from parents, the better. It will go a long way to improving trust. For the average student, I think our school is doing a good job. Their focus is on the middle 67% of the bell curve. What is the school doing for the top 16%, the high-achieving kids? Are those kids dragged down? And what is it doing for the 16% of kids on the bottom of that curve?*
- *I believe that for a portion of our school population, for the kids who come from stable homes and where there is a culture of success, we're doing a great job. However, for the kids from marginalized families or come from varying degrees of broken homes, we fall short. There are two reasons for that: a) a lack of resources; and b) more effective use of the resources we do have at our disposal. Some of our kids are always swimming against the current, and that's hard. This is a hard problem to figure out an answer for, but for some kids, our schools should be preparing them to become a functional adult and get out of the cycle of poverty they're caught in. We need to find ways to give the most at-risk kids the skills to cope. There are kids who are outwardly struggling; those are the kids who show up in the office for us to deal with. And then there are a lot more kids who are quietly sitting in class in the elementary grades; they're not being sent to our office; they're getting by. By high school, they separate themselves out, and may begin simply to drop out and not show up for school any more.*
- *I don't really think schools know what to do to help prepare kids of color. First of all, we don't have that many teachers of color; if we did, that would help. They would be role models that kids could trust. I think we're at a standstill right now. We should be trying to get kids of color to stay in the area and to make the town more diverse and friendly to people of color.*
- *I think our schools prepare kids pretty well. All of my friends are doing well. They all didn't go to college, but they're doing well or planning to do well. If the school evolves as the town grows, that will be a good thing. One thing I think would help all kids and that would be more training--any training--about dealing with paying taxes, budgeting and managing money. I know*



*it's an elective, but I think those courses should be mandatory. Giving people better social skills is always a good thing. I would say that I definitely don't hate the school.*

- *I think students would benefit from having more access to counselors. Instead of being seen as a resource only for kids who had troubles at home or to help apply for a scholarship, I think counseling should be a maintenance process where every student has an opportunity once or twice a year to check in. Maybe they don't need anything, but give them the opportunity.*
- *I'm not sure there is a clear goal that we are working towards. Show us how the resources are going towards making sure students will be successful when they graduate. My grandson is bored in 7th grade; how is this possible? And can we keep moving things forward and focus on academic, learning, knowledge building that meets kids where they are.*
- *There were faculty members—Mrs. Hall, for example—who went way out of their way to make sure we had an opportunity to understand what awaited us when we left high school. I believe I had excellent preparation for life after high school, and I think Grand Rapids does an excellent job of providing opportunities for kids. I had an amazing experience, and I believe I developed decently. I know there were students who made personal choices that didn't enable them to be as successful, but other than those students, I think the school did a great job.*